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(EdD) at the Open University, UK

Centre for Research in Education and Education Technology --
Educational Leadership and Management

*Exploring the Nature of Student Consumerism
at Postsecondary Institutions in
British Columbia, Canada*

by

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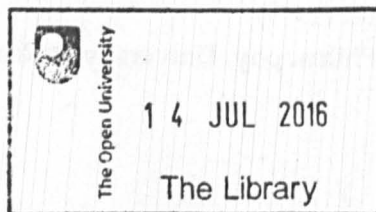
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Exploring the Nature of Student Consumerism at Postsecondary Institutions in British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT

The notion that students can be seen as consumers in the marketplace of higher education -- in much the same way as they are viewed as consumers in other markets -- has been around for several decades but has received little empirical investigation or scholarship, despite being the topic of considerable popular discourse and often with very polarized opinions expressed.

This research study explored the context within which the phenomenon of student consumerism has arisen, and focused specifically on exploring that phenomenon within postsecondary institutions in British Columbia (BC), Canada.

The thesis reports on a qualitative investigation into the nature of student consumerism among students in postsecondary institutions in BC. Data were collected using focus groups and semi-structured interviews that explored with student participants to what extent, and in what ways, students perceive themselves to be, and to behave as, consumers -- and whether these findings vary among students in different programmes or types of institutions in BC.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups. From the data collected, a series of common themes are presented to reveal how the participants viewed their relations to their institutions within a consumerist framework and in what ways they did -- and did

not -- consider themselves to be behaving as consumers in an educational marketplace.

Findings showed that students did not see themselves fully as consumers *per se*, but did report several ways in which they were behaving as consumers of education. The majority of participants viewed themselves primarily as “learners” not “purchasers.” They realized that they were co-producers in the educational outcome and were not *simply* purchasing a credential. However, they reported a variety of shopping behaviours that clearly revealed they were seeking value-for-money for their educational outcomes that extended well beyond merely the “learning” activity. Furthermore, participants reported that marketing and other actions by institutions themselves served to reinforce, often unwelcomingly, a consumer ethos that the students may not share or value.

This study breaks new ground in exploring the phenomenon of the student-as-consumer in Canada where the topic has rarely been discussed. In addition, this research adds to previous work which has called into question a simplistic view of student consumerism by finding that some postsecondary students primarily view themselves as learners, not as consumers *per se*, even though they acknowledge and demonstrate some consumer behaviour and expectations. The study also provides a suggested explanation of how the participants viewed themselves as student consumers.

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Producing a document like this is a long journey not just a final destination. While that has been said before, it is worth repeating because a completed doctoral thesis remains such an arduous and audacious undertaking.

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Needless to say, whatever errors or omissions remain in this final text are entirely my own responsibility.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the nature of students as *consumers* in the marketplace of higher education -- in much the same way as they are seen as consumers in other markets. The primary intention is to consider whether and how students view themselves as consumers and to understand this relationship from the student's perspective using the data collected in the study. The scope of the research is limited to a sample of students attending postsecondary institutions in British Columbia (BC), Canada.

Chapter One of the thesis provides the context within which the research was undertaken. First, the chapter discusses the background of the notion of *student-as-consumer* which has arisen in higher education, as universities and colleges have tried to counteract the influence of greater competition for students and increased accountability to government, along with the influence of other aspects of neo-liberalism. The chapter outlines the context within which these developments have been taking place with reference to Canada -- and specifically the province of BC -- and provides an introduction to the system of higher education in that country and province. The chapter concludes by explaining why the notion of student-as-consumer matters, how relevant it remains as a focus of study, and how important its implications are to higher education today.

Macro-Level Forces in Higher Education

Discourse about the phenomenon of student consumerism has been provoked and shaped over the past decades by several macro-level forces impinging on universities and colleges around the world.

First, there has been a drive for the expansion and democratisation of higher education to increase accessibility to entry for large numbers of students previously excluded. For example, in the 1990s Bercuson *et al.* (1997) noted the participation rate for university full-time students in Canada was 150% larger than it was in the 1950s before the rise in mass higher education. In response to this massification, these authors offer harsh criticism suggesting universities lost their way, corrupted by the increased funding they could garner from provincial agencies:

Canada's universities quickly found themselves at a crossroads. Was the university intended to provide a high-quality education to those who were most likely to benefit from it? Or were universities there just as another sorting mechanism for the labour market, a system designed to separate the white-collar workers from the blue? Canadian universities predictably and characteristically dithered and decided to go in neither direction – they reduced the quality of education offered to those who were the brightest in society and, instead, made themselves into an ineffective sorting mechanism.... Why did the universities not cry halt? In a word -- money. Larger enrolments and a commitment to accessibility meant the university could make a strong case for ever-higher government funding, especially as most provinces adopted a per capita financing scheme. (p.48-49)

The second macro-level influence on higher education has been the political and economic rise of neo-liberalism which has encouraged society to

import the perspective of the marketplace into the public sector (Fitzsimmons, 2003, Patrick 2013). The term “customer” is just one of many terms such as target market, bottom-line, profit centre and value proposition that have been imported from the language of business into the language of higher education (Ayers 2005, Boyd 2011). For example, Raisman (2002), describes the importation of corporate terminology this way:

Colleges are starting to see higher education in business-like realities. They are realizing that revenue depends on selling the college (recruitment) to its customers (students and parents). Sales (enrollment) are made based on the college’s brand (image), product (courses, programs, degrees), and by creating a connection with the customer (customer service). (p. 4)

Neo-liberalism is more proactive than laissez-faire capitalism (Harvey 2005) because rather than leaving events to the *invisible hand* of the market, neo-liberalism “seeks to create an individual who is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur” (p.59). Neo-liberalism has also influenced the evolution of consumer culture generally in society (Treadwell *et al.* 2012) and the rise of a more reflexive society (Wellen 2005).

In the public sector, neo-liberalism is experienced through a *new managerialism* that stresses accountability for the use of public funds and the need to optimise effectiveness and efficiency (Olssen & Peters 2005, Foskett, 2011, Hall *et al.* 2012) in all operations. Even further, neo-liberalism repositions public institutions as entrepreneurs themselves and creates a marketplace of competition as a mechanism to provoke change within a sector (Wellen 2005, Gilde 2007, Jacob *et al.* 2013). Doherty (2015) summarises the role that student consumerism plays

within the overarching framework of neoliberal policy:

Neoliberalism as metapolicy reconstructs the “problem” of education and other public services as a crisis of quality and efficiency, and its “solution” in market mechanism of individualistic choice. Consumer choice is then supported and encouraged by systemic investments in regimes to measure and report on quality or productivity... The state can thus abrogate responsibility to ensure or deliver quality, but instead, passes to the citizen/consumer a responsibility to demand and reward it. (p. 395)

In response, institutions of higher education have viewed the impact of neo-liberalism as a subversion of the education process and an encroachment on their academic freedom (Tudiver 1999, Turk 2000, Tuchman 2009). For example, George (2007) points to the impact on core freedoms in academia:

Institutions of higher education have three fundamental freedoms: They teach what they want, to whom they want and in the way they want. Anything that threatens these freedoms has been seen as undesirable. (p.966)

Others, such as Jamieson and Naidoo (2004) have argued that a simplistic neo-liberalistic approach in higher education is flawed precisely because it undermines performance in students and academic staff, and will therefore be counter-productive:

We believe that the biggest problem with the neo-liberal project in higher education is simply that it will not deliver what it promises... because the potential damage done to the learning and teaching nexus is unlikely to produce graduates with the requisite skills and attributes. (p.15)

Since higher education has not been quick to embrace the new “academic capitalism” (Slaughter & Leslie 1997), there has been a general erosion of confidence in the accountability of higher education by public officials and legislators that has led to a severe weakening of government support and funding, leading to a demise in the previously strong “social compact” (Faulkner 2008) between society and the role of universities within it. As massification has increased the number of students dramatically, the government’s ability to pay its previous proportion of the costs has eroded (Wellen 2005). When viewed through the lens of neo-liberalism, government generally tends to reduce its financial contribution and to create a more competitive marketplace (Conway *et al.* 1994, Palfreyman 2012). The combined effect has been governments in general invoking large rises in tuition fees for students and this in turn has increased students’ power as buyers within the academic marketplace (Ross 2013).

The third macro-level influence has been globalisation of higher education, where institutions compete internationally for students and resources (Levin 2005), and the high-skill policy agenda of governments which seek to develop a highly skilled national workforce that can compete in a knowledge economy (Olssen & Peters 2005). Globalism has led governments to favour the offering of vocational or technical programmes over academic ones for student funding, and it has encouraged students to attend higher education as a means of obtaining better future employment rather than intellectual development (Molesworth & Scullion 2005, Naidoo 2011). Globalism has also encouraged governments to fund and reward university research that develops new knowledge with commercial application and benefits (Jones & Weinrib 2011). The indirect impact of funds and

attention being steered towards applied research has been increased undergraduate class sizes and less contact with professors.

These forces propelling change within higher education seem likely to intensify in the future and will probably increase opportunities for features of student consumerism to affect the operations of postsecondary institutions (Wellen 2005, Naidoo & Williams 2015). A report in 2009 from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in the USA describes the anticipated vision of the College of 2020 based on trend data, interviews with experts and a poll of admissions officials. The report concludes:

The students of 2020 will demand an education on their terms and will be seeking a technology-based customized approach. The bottom line is they will want it all: a plethora of learning options that they can mix and match to play to their strengths... To compete for students, many colleges will need to re-imagine themselves as more convenient and more open -- and market in a way that makes them appear more likely to give a student a career boost than the college down the street. (Chronicle Research Services 2009, pp. 52-53)

However, while such forces as different as advanced mobile technology platforms or “top up” tuition fees (Jones 2010) may provide more power to the student consumer in the postsecondary marketplace, further developments in globalisation may reduce the earning power of graduates in a global war for talent. Research conducted by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (Brown *et al.* 2008) in the UK, based on a study of activities by leading

transnational companies, revealed that high-value work in addition to manufacturing jobs is already being exported from the developed world. In a foreword to the report, Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Council, concludes:

This means that we may be entering an era in which many of the young people now investing heavily in their education across the developed world may struggle to attain the comfortable jobs and careers to which they aspire. They risk being bypassed by decisions to send work that would once have come their way naturally to people in Asia and elsewhere, who bring the same skills to employers at much lower prices. (Diamond 2008, p.2)

Postsecondary Education in Canada

Canada's postsecondary education landscape is unusual in the developed world in having no national office of education and no national co-ordinated system for higher education (Jones 2012). The British North America Act of 1867, which is the constitutional document that defines the separate authorities of the provinces and the national confederation, delegates responsibility for postsecondary education to the various provincial governments. Thus, while the federal government provides generic funding to the provinces for postsecondary education from federal tax revenue, each province is free to decide what postsecondary institutions it will have and how they are organised. The federal government also supports the funding of the research activities of postsecondary institutions by operating funding agencies that supply research grants to the universities. In addition, the bulk of student financial aid available as grants and loans is controlled by federal programmes. So, while the federal government

significantly underwrites the system, it does not determine the system.

As a result, each province in Canada has developed its own separate system of postsecondary education and these can vary widely across the country. For example, Quebec operates a system of preparatory colleges called *Cégeps* which students attend before entering a university directly. Nova Scotia possesses a large number of small universities that were founded with -- and still maintain strong linkages with -- the Roman Catholic church or other religions. Alberta and BC adopted the two-year community college or “junior college” model from California and developed detailed credit transfer agreements among institutions to allow for student mobility. Ontario developed a different college system that focuses on vocational programmes and, until recently, did not foster much credit transfer for students among colleges and universities.

British Columbia’s Postsecondary System

The province of BC has one of the most comprehensive and diversified postsecondary education systems in the world with several distinctive features and some unique ones that set it aside in the Canadian context.

To start with, BC is geographically isolated from the rest of Canada by the Rocky Mountains and the province has a well-developed and regionally dispersed series of postsecondary institutions which leads to most students completing their studies within the province (BCCAT 2013).

BC also has developed an integrated system of course credit transfer among its postsecondary institutions which provides its students with extensive pathways to obtain a postsecondary credential in the province. This system of articulating transfer agreements allows students to gain equivalent courses or blocks of courses when transferring from one location to another when continuing their studies. Indeed, this credit transfer system is especially noted for its success: "BC has taken the California model and developed it into what is possibly the most extensive credit accumulation and transfer arrangement in the world" (Bekhradnia 2004 p.7).

This comprehensive transfer system in the province, articulated through a central agency called the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT), has enabled and even promoted wide mobility in the educational pathways of postsecondary students. For example, between 30% and 40% of students completing a degree at a four-year institution actually began their programmes in colleges before transferring to university (BCCAT 2013). In addition, the transfer system has acted as a lever of democratisation within society since many transfer students have characteristics that would put them in a socio-demographic group of people who traditionally did not enter higher education before the system of colleges was built (BCCAT 2013), and the grades earned by transfer students once at university are essentially indistinguishable from those students who made direct entry into university. As Cowin (2007) emphasises:

Although perhaps as much the result of geography and a relatively small undergraduate capacity in its universities as the result of good

educational planning, BC colleges have been as successful as any in the world in serving a heterogeneous student body. (p.28)

Another feature of the higher education system in BC that favours student mobility is the extensive range of types of postsecondary institutions in the province. BC has 26 publicly funded institutions—see Table 1. There are four *research-intensive universities* of varying sizes from the University of British Columbia (UBC), the largest with over 54,000 students, to the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), the smallest with under 4,200 students. Three *special purpose universities* exist to serve niche missions, such as Royal Roads University which offers postgraduate degrees only intended for mid-career professional students studying part-time, or Thompson Rivers University that includes the provincial Open Learning University modelled on the UK's Open University. The province has four *institutes* that focus on vocational and technical programmes, such as the British Columbia Institute of Technology or the Justice Institute of British Columbia. There are eleven *colleges* throughout the province that largely function as regional centres of higher education, such as Selkirk College in the Kootenay Region or North Island College on Vancouver Island, or urban centres such as Camosun College in Victoria or Langara College in Vancouver. Additionally, there are four *private universities* that either recruit primarily international students, such as University Canada West, or religious students such as Trinity Western University. These institutions are authorized by the province to offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Finally, there are more than 350 registered privately-owned colleges in the province, with more

Table 1: Types of Postsecondary Institutions in British Columbia

Research Universities Simon Fraser University University of British Columbia University of Northern British Columbia University of Victoria	Teaching Universities Capilano University Kwantlen Polytechnic University Vancouver Island University University of the Fraser Valley
Special Purpose Universities Emily Carr University of Art and Design Royal Roads University Thompson Rivers University, Open Learning	Colleges Camosun College College of New Caledonia College of the Rockies Douglas College Langara College North Island College Northern Lights College Northwest College Okanagan College Selkirk College Vancouver Community College
Institutes British Columbia Institute of Technology Institute of Indigenous Government Justice Institute Nicola Valley Institute of Technology	Private Universities (some examples) Fairleigh Dickenson University Quest University Trinity Western University University Canada West
Private Academic Colleges (some examples) Alexander College Art Institute of Vancouver Columbia College Coquitlam College Corpus Christi College	Private Career Colleges (some examples) Coast Helicopter College Hair Art Academy Sprout Shaw Community College Stenburg College Vancouver Animation School

than 175 of these being accredited by the overseeing provincial regulatory agency.

Some of these private colleges are academic institutions offering credit courses in arts and sciences that transfer to public institutions and attract mostly international students. Others are career colleges that provide short term vocational training programmes in such areas as hairdressing, avionics, video animation, and medical assistant training. The operations and standards of these institutions are regulated by the Private Career Training Institutions Agency (<http://www.pctia.bc.ca/>).

This comprehensive system of higher education has grown quickly over a relative short period of time and evolved dramatically in the past twenty years, both trends being responses to changing needs within the province. The University of British Columbia started in 1908 and functioned as the only university until 1963 when Simon Fraser University was built to accommodate the growing post-war expansion of access to university, and at the same time the University of Victoria was created out of Victoria College which had been affiliated with McGill University of Montreal.

A large-scale, province-wide collection of community colleges was established throughout the 1970s in response to recommendations of the MacDonald Report (1962) to further expand access to higher education for students who had not previously been eligible, or for vocational programmes not offered by the traditional universities. Based largely on the two-year colleges in the California system, these community colleges were popular and well-subscribed because they boasted several new features and values. As Cowin

(2007) notes: "Modest tuition fees and an open admission philosophy (to the institution, not to all programs and courses) rounded out the college educational philosophy of geographical and social access, community responsiveness, and interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum" (p. 10).

Again in response to a growing population and to demands for more postsecondary places, the provincial government expanded the system considerably in the early 1990s. One unusual feature of this expansion was to convert three and eventually five of the community colleges into *teaching universities* called University Colleges which were authorised to grant bachelor's degrees in applied areas rather than pure academic arts or sciences. These institutions were limited to undergraduate study and could not offer postgraduate degrees, and thus were distinct from the research universities proper. However, the institutions retained all of their previous career, vocational and preparatory programming, simply expanding through diversification. This hybrid mission was unusual in North America, although it has since spread elsewhere, and it eventually expanded throughout Canada but by colleges being turned directly into universities rather than going through the hybrid "university college" nomenclature. Thus, for example, Mount Royal College in Calgary (founded 1931) was renamed Mount Royal University in 2009, whereas Malaspina College (founded 1969) in Nanaimo became Malaspina University College in 1995 and finally the University of Vancouver Island in 2008.

Another feature of the spread of the massification of higher education has

been a gradual decline in the value of secondary school graduation as a credential viewed favourably by employers (Farrington, 2014) who have demanded higher levels of education as prerequisites to being hired. This has been most noticeable in the professions. In BC today, for example, entry into such diverse fields as nursing or accounting requires that students have acquired a bachelor's degree first in a relevant field before being eligible to practice, a trend occurring in other jurisdictions also (e.g. Bowcott, 2009). What used to require only a two year diploma now requires a four year degree. In response, many of the colleges that enrolled hundreds of students in nursing diploma programmes needed to upgrade these programmes to degree level. As a result, the provincial government in 2002 through the *Degree Authorization Act* permitted all colleges in BC to grant applied undergraduate degrees and for the new universities to offer Master's level degrees.

In keeping with similar trends in higher education worldwide, the cost of tuition fees in Canada has risen steadily in the past two decades. Average tuition and other compulsory fees in Canada increased almost threefold between 1993/94 and 2014/15. During this same timeframe, tuition fees -- as a proportion of institutional operating revenue -- increased from 18% to almost 37% (Shaker & Macdonald 2014).

Since 2005, the BC provincial government has restricted the ability for post-secondary institutions to increase unilaterally student tuition fees and other ancillary fees such as for student services or new technologies (AVED 2016). The logic behind this restriction is to ensure that fee increases are reasonable and

justifiable. This mechanism ensures that tuition fee increases are limited to the rate of inflation in the province, as determined by government. However, the net impact of this provincial policy is that institutions yearly increase tuition fees by the allowable inflationary rate -- whether institutions need the additional revenue or not -- precisely because institutions are prevented by government from recouping amounts from previous years where they did not increase fees (Heisler 2012).

Why Student Consumerism is Important in British Columbia

Within BC specifically, the idea that students behave as consumers of higher education is rarely examined or discussed in the literature, but various aspects of the influence of neo-liberalism are clearly evident in higher education in the province. These proceed within an environment where institutions are responding *as if* students are consumers and *as if* this status should be taken into account. The examples that follow will help to support this assertion.

For example, the University of British Columbia (UBC) in the summer of 2012 hired 42 new staff to act as personal advisors to all new students to guide and assist them throughout their academic studies at UBC. Previously, students would have been served haphazardly by whomever was working on the day that a student requested service. This new individualized and highly expensive service model is linked to a larger strategy of improving the student experience at UBC (Ridge 2012). UBC's desire to improve the student experience mirrors similar responses by other universities and colleges worldwide to personalize

more the relationship with the institution and treat the student as a valued, individual consumer of a purchased experience.

Another example is institutions in BC seeking to centralize in one location their services to make them more available to students as single customer service centres. For instance, the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) in Prince George, BC now delivers all student services in one central location. It is designed to resemble a shopping mall with a central street and the different service departments – for example, counselling, financial aid, disability services, and employment services -- all presented as if they were separate stores in a shopping centre. Bringing all of the services together into a central hub is intended to provide a more convenient location. The centre is sponsored by Telus, a national communications company, and called *Telus Student Services Street* (see: <http://www.unbc.ca/about-unbc/tour/student-street>). Similar centralized student service centres have been constructed at Capilano University in North Vancouver, the British Columbia Institute of Technology in Burnaby, and Camosun College in Victoria.

Offering guarantees of graduation to students is another example of higher education institutions pursuing policies that emphasize the transactional outcomes for students and mirror policies of the consumer marketplace. University Canada West located in Victoria, BC, for example, introduced a guarantee to graduates of its Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programme (University Canada West 2015). Students who actively pursue the learning objectives of the MBA programme are guaranteed graduation with the

MBA credential under the university's "Graduation Guarantee Contract." The university indicated the guarantee was intentionally self-promotional: "The programme encourages undergraduates and executives to advance their skills and knowledge of business. The guarantee expresses confidence in University Canada West's learning approaches" (University Canada West 2015, p. 2). Although University Canada West is the first in BC to offer such a graduation guarantee, similar contracts have been created in Canada at the University of Calgary, University of Regina, Sainte-Anne University in Nova Scotia and by the Ontario Ministry of Health's Nursing Graduate Guarantee programme.

Trinity Western University (TWU) in Langley, BC decided that commuter students -- those who do not reside on campus but travel in daily -- needed to be encouraged and supported to stay longer on campus and be more integrated into daily campus life (Trinity Western University 2015). To that end, the university created a Collegium Program:

Collegial commuter facilities are a home away from home for more than 700 commuter students. Each collegium is focused around academic disciplines or designated student classes. A collegium is a relaxing refuge before, between, and after classes and a great place to connect with other students, staff, and faculty. Collegium Program Assistants (CAs) support commuter students in their transition and development at TWU. These intentional community spaces are fully equipped with kitchens and lounge areas including space for eating, studying, and accessing reference materials. (np.)

Similar services to enhance the experience of commuter students have been created in BC at the Okanagan campus of the University of British Columbia (UBC).

In addition, the provincial government has also indicated in its planning, action and policies that it sees the relationship evolving between higher education and its students in ways that are consistent with viewing students more as consumers. The Plant Report (Plant 2007), called *Campus 2020: Thinking Ahead*, is the current strategic planning document published by the government of BC on the role and future of the postsecondary sector. Unlike similar policy background documents produced by governments in other jurisdictions, notably the UK, it is less strident about putting students at the “centre” of the educational enterprise, but it does contain some relevant observations that indicate similarly-held values:

The learning landscape of the future will be increasingly be learner-driven and outcome-focused. (p.5)

The vast enterprise of postsecondary education in British Columbia exists first, foremost and fundamentally to create opportunities for learners. (p.8)

One interesting initiative from the BC provincial government is the recent programme to offer free textbooks for forty of the most popular postsecondary subject areas (BC Ministry of Advanced Education 2015). These textbooks are available for all students and academic staff to download from the BC Campus website. This will provide access for over 200,000 students per year studying in BC. A media release quotes Amrik Virk, then BC Advanced Education Minister, as saying, "We're leading the country with our development of open, online textbooks, using technology to make education more flexible and affordable." Kevin Choy, an interactive arts and technology student at Simon Fraser

University is also quoted: "The open textbook project is really going to help me and other students. Having already spent about \$3,000 on textbooks, I see the ability to download free online textbooks and the option to purchase low-cost printed copies as being particularly valuable" (BC Ministry of Advanced Education 2013, p.1).

Personal and Professional Interest in Topic

I have been involved as an educator in the post-secondary sector in British Columbia for over 30 years at the time of conducting this research study, as an instructor (lecturer), departmental administrator, dean and registrar.

During that time, I have been keenly interested in student development, student persistence, and effective policy to ensure student success. Recently, I have also become intrigued by the impact that neo-liberal economic and political principles have had on the evolution of the post-secondary landscape, particularly in British Columbia. As the cost of tuition and other fees to students have increased, and as the compensatory benefits to students have arguably decreased, I have wondered to what extent students are approaching their post-secondary programmes of study with a more consumerist attitude. Do they perceive their post-secondary education as a commercial transaction where they seek value-for-money? Do they expect their post-secondary institutions to behave and to deliver in similar ways as other agencies from whom they purchase experiences? Do they foresee gains or shortcomings in their experience of post-secondary education in the same light as other consumer transactions they are involved in?

The research study I undertook, and which is reported on in this thesis, was embarked upon from the context of my personal experience and professional interest in its potential significance for helping post-secondary institutions in British Columbia to understand the impact of this changing landscape.

Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of the thesis is organized into a series of chapters that are structured as follows:

Chapter Two of the thesis provides a review of the literature on the topic of student consumerism, exploring how students have been viewed as consumers before and what previous research has investigated the phenomenon. The first section called *Viewing Students as Consumers* discusses the historical, economic, and academic context within which the phenomenon of student consumerism has arisen. This is followed by a section called *Defining Student Consumerism* that examines how the concept has been used and the different meanings that have been applied in the literature. The subsequent section called *Researching Student Consumerism* presents a review of empirical studies on student consumerism and outlines the need for additional research of the kind pursued in this study.

Chapter Three describes, explains and justifies the research methodology undertaken in the research study conducted. The first section of the chapter explains the purpose of the research, and explains the research methodology adopted and the research questions that are framed from this perspective. The

research participants are described next, including how and why the participants were selected. Then the data collection methods of focus groups and personal interviews are explained, along with the list of questions asked of the participants. The methods of data analysis are explained and discussed along with how the data was used to generate findings. The chapter concludes with three sections that discuss the validity of the research design, the various limitations of the research project, and finally the ethical considerations and ethics approval.

Chapter Four presents and discusses the findings of the study. The first section explores some general aspects of the data to indicate that participants had engaged well with the research questions which had facilitated responses that were insightful, topical and relevant. The second section examines in depth the clusters of concepts that emerged from the thematic analysis and discusses how they were related and how they helped to answer the research questions of the study. The chapter outlines a suggested explanation that was derived from the major themes emerging from the study, and which is intended to explain tentatively the collective perspectives of the participants with respect to the nature of student consumerism as experienced by those participants. Finally, the chapter returns to the research questions and determines how the results obtained provided answers to those questions.

The final chapter concludes the thesis. First, the chapter summarises the research study. Next, the significance of those conclusions specifically, and the significance of the study generally, are discussed. The implications of the results are then explained -- both the implications for higher education in British

Columbia and elsewhere -- as well as the implications for educational practice in general. Finally, the chapter offers some recommendations for future research to be conducted.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the context within which the research study has been conceived, developed and implemented. An overview of the thesis has been provided along with an explanation for how interest in the topic of student consumerism arises out of the macro-forces influencing higher education today. The chapter has provided an introduction to the landscape of postsecondary education in Canada generally, and BC specifically, to assist the reader to understand both the historical and prevailing milieu of the location of the research study. The chapter has also explored why the topic of student consumerism is relevant and important as a research topic today in this region. In addition, the chapter has discussed my personal and professional interest in the topic.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

How have students been viewed as consumers? What previous research has investigated the phenomenon? The following chapter seeks to answer these questions and to justify the need for new research in this field. It begins by discussing the historical, economic and academic context within which the phenomenon of student consumerism has arisen.

Viewing Students as Consumers

Interest in the student-as-consumer is not new. Tuition fees have been charged by higher education institutions in many countries for a long time and those paying the fees have always been keen on evaluating what they receive in return for this monetary exchange. But as the cost of higher education fees has risen, so has the interest by stakeholders in obtaining value-for-money. This is aptly captured in the comment made in 2011 by David Willetts, then the UK's Minister of State for Universities and Science: "We are ultimately talking about students as consumers.... When people are paying 6, 7, 8 or £9000 a year for this experience, they are bloody well going to be consumerist about it" (quoted by Fuhl 2011).

The history of students as consumers is as old as the institutions themselves. At the University of Bologna, considered to be the oldest university in the modern world (Williams, L. 2012), the students ran the university. They

hired their own professors, determined how much to pay the professors, dismissed them if they were deemed to be of inferior teaching ability, and had considerable influence on what curriculum was taught. The students acted as the governors of the university inviting teachers to join the university. Many of the students were not native to Bologna and were relatively wealthy, and so the local community relied upon the money the students brought into the economy. A number of other universities in southern Europe copied this student-centric model (Cobban 1980). In contrast, the University of Paris was run by administrators, clergy and local agencies that consolidated themselves into corporations who hired and paid the professors. Other universities in northern Europe were established along these lines in countries where government was more organized than in the city-states of Italy. The student-run universities only lasted until the fourteenth century (Cobban 1980).

Does this history have any relevance for the modern notion of students as consumers? Jenkins (2011) thinks so. He writes in a blog called *Modern Medieval*:

What the history of the medieval university brings to the modern discourse on the future of Higher Education is the certainty that whomever pays for the professors holds the power. With the slashing of education budgets, and the increase in tuition fees, the balance of power is once again shifting in favour of the students. (np.)

However, as he goes on to say, it is doubtful whether this shift in the balance of power is likely to swing so far as to return to the student-centric model of medieval Bologna.

Another entry at the same blog site, written by Stag (2012), a college professor from Ottawa, considers this issue further and argues that, despite the competitive landscape that institutions find themselves in today, a variety of vested interests are too entrenched to transfer much consumer power to higher education students:

I am a professor (grand title...I am an instructor) at a college here in Ottawa. My tenure, my very existence [*sic*] as an instructor is predicated on the number of bums I can get put in their seats. I find that I have to tweet, facebook, even at times call or email students to remind them to sign up. But then, my courses are all elective. Just like the courses in medieval Bologna....

Universities at the very highest level have to compete with other universities. As the baby boom is turning into the baby bust, universities are facing the same challenges I face every 7 weeks. My sympathy doesn't overwhelm me...they have full time well paid staff to deal with these problems...but I do understand. Will there be a sea change? A change to more student driven degree programmes? I doubt it. The entrenched vested interests won't allow it. They will just keep jacking tuition up, dumbing down curriculae [*sic*], and becoming creative with funding until they find the whole shambling university structure is cut out from underneath them. Already many arts and soft sciences have been cut, ostensibly in favour of hard sciences in every University I know of. (np)

Despite the earlier power of some medieval students, the modern concept of *student consumerism* can be linked first to student activism in the late 1960s (Riesman 1980) and the general rise in consumerism in society (Packard 1957, Barber 2008). The phenomenon of student consumerism was first identified in the literature in the early 1970s and it has become a lightning rod for a variety of emotionally-charged discourses ever since. For example, Stark (1975) discussed a new force of consumerism emerging among students and linked it to a general flexing of muscles by dissatisfied customers in general which had previously not

been directed at higher education. Interestingly, the reasons she offered for this new force sound remarkably timeless when viewed from a vantage point forty years later:

Perhaps the consumerist movement is related to the current buyer's market in postsecondary education, and to the student's recognition that they have the opportunity to be fussy about the service they receive.... The movement certainly owes some strength to students' anxiety about future employment opportunities, and to the tension they and their parents feel about larger and larger tuition outlays in a time of inflation. It may be aided and abetted by an increase in high pressure sales techniques of admissions personnel. (p.2)

In the USA, the 1976 amendments to the Higher Education Act -- often referred to as the Student Consumer Information Services regulations (Mackenzie 1978) -- included provisions to require universities and colleges to be more consumer responsive (Shulman 1976) and these changes revealed the extent to which legislators were responding to demands from the public for more consumer protection (Penn & Franks 1982), particularly with the administering of student financial loan programmes (McKenzie 1978). In Canada, an early response to consumerism was professors in a business school examining what role they should play in cultivating more consumer-responsive graduates (Sarkar & Saleh 1972).

Discourse on the appropriateness of thinking of students as consumers continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s. A particularly spirited debate (Eisenberg 1997, Shepperd 1997) occurred in the journal *Teaching Sociology* in

response to Delucchi & Smith's (1997a) views of student consumerism being a feature of a postmodern society. Most of the discourse focused on the student-as-customer metaphor and how useful this metaphor was in the context of higher education (Farago 1982, Schwartzman 1995, McMillan & Cheney 1996, Franz 1998, Baldwin & James 2000, Delucchi & Korgen 2002). Some have argued that institutions should put students first and focus on meeting their needs (Hill 1995, O'Banion, 1997, Raisman 2002, Bejou, 2005, Collis, 2013). For example, Astin (1984), viewed educational excellence from a talent-development model, whereby institutions should focus on cultivating the skills and abilities of their students, rather than cultivating prestige or acquiring resources.

Others have argued that changing expectations among students themselves have created a more demanding environment for universities and colleges (Rhoades 1987, Bejou 2005, Miller 2010, Mark 2013a) where the role of the student-as-consumer has increased (Scott 1999, Maguad 2007, Enache, 2011, Obermiller & Atwood 2011). For example, Coaldrake (2002b) argued:

It is readily apparent to all those who work in higher education that students have high expectations of their universities and that these expectations are of greater complexity and a different order to those which might have applied in past decades. Further, the impact of these expectations and the ways in which a university responds to and shapes them is increasingly important for the future welfare of the university. (p.1)

At the forefront of advocates for greater customer satisfaction in the treatment of students by institutions of higher education has been governments themselves (BIS 2011, Foskett 2011, Bravenboer 2009, Williams, J. 2013). The

Charter for Higher Education in the UK, for example, included this observation from the national Department for Education: "Universities and colleges are more and more aware of the need to deliver high quality services, responding to the needs and demands of customers" (Department for Education 1993, p.2).

In addition, the proliferation of Student Charters as declarations of students' rights at higher education institutions (Aldridge & Rowley 1998, Student Charter Group 2011, Naidoo & Williams, 2015) and requirements to disclose information to potential students -- such as under the *Higher Education Opportunities Act* in the USA -- are tangible features of deliberate government policy to increase the status of students as consumers. The introduction of "guarantees" within higher education -- where institutions guarantee that students will obtain employment in their chosen field after graduation -- is another feature of a more consumer-orientated academy (McCollough & Gremler 1999, Gremler & McCollough 2002, Hoover 2010, Coronos 2012).

Moreover, the popularity of media rankings of colleges and universities, such the *MacLean's Magazine* annual reviews in Canada (Maclean's 2013), have also contributed to fostering a consumerist approach to comparisons of higher education institutions (King *et al.* 2008, Jones-Devitt & Samiei 2011, Lynch 2015), a development that universities themselves have criticized for producing "a ranking system that has little scientific merit because it reduces everything to a meaningless, average score" (Naylor 2006).

Another suggestion is that forces fuelling student consumerism may be

linked to a new generation of students. Twenge (2007) has analysed how today's generation of students attending postsecondary institutions are more materialistic and self-focused than previous generations were. She states: "The trend is more of an emphasis on extrinsic values such as money, fame, and image, and less emphasis on intrinsic values such as self-acceptance, group affiliation and community." This may be linked to students today having more disposable income. Chang (2013) argues, "Previous generations like the baby Boomers didn't have the discretionary income some of the kids today have. Because there's a higher level of discretionary income, there's an ability to spend in this cohort that wasn't in existence in previous cohorts."

In opposition to these views that support the notion of students as consumers are authors who argue that education is not a product or service to be bought in the marketplace, and that importing such terminology from the world of commerce into the world of academia is naive (Svensson & Wood 2007, Williams, J. 2011, Davis 2011), because it erodes academic sovereignty (Stein *et al.* 2013) and it undermines the ethos of education as a public good (Acevedo 2011, Schwartzman 2013). Some authors have suggested that the consumer metaphor may apply to all the various services offered to students on campus, but that the metaphor stops at the classroom door (Thirunarayanan 2012). Others, such as Eagle & Brennan (2007), find no value at all in the concept:

We contend that any naïve implementation of the "student-as-customer" idea in higher education, although probably meant with the best of intentions, is likely to have results that are contrary to the best interests of the students themselves.... In summary, the student-as-customer concept is largely valueless in higher education. (p.58)

Beyond being merely unhelpful, others have suggested that the concept of student-as-consumer is pernicious because it shifts the onus of responsibility for learning from the student to the institution, and turns the student into a passive agent with damaging consequences (Potts 2005, Naidoo & Jamieson 2005, Rochford 2008, Haywood *et al.* 2011, Williams, J. 2011, Harrison & Riser 2015). For instance, Coates & Morrison (2011) suggest institutions should actually demand much more effort from students or risk insufficiently preparing them for “real life” challenges:

University is not all about students, or shouldn't be. The current pattern of seeing students as customers, to be cultivated and pampered, is fundamentally wrong. Universities have stopped expecting an all-out effort from students. While failure is still a possibility at university, in many programs passing does not require the same effort it did a few decades back. Much of the responsibility for success has shifted from the student to the institution.... Professors often shy away from high-level demands because they generate student anger, lengthy student appeals, and all manner of other challenges.... Canadian graduates too often feel better about themselves and their accomplishments than they should. A cruel, competitive world, one that rewards hard-driving winners and casts aside those with a sense of entitlement, awaits. (pp.117-118)

Many authors have argued that the polarisation in the debate is misplaced because students and academic staff are partners (Ferris 2002, Sierra 2010, Regan 2012) or co-producers in the learning process (Bay & Daniel 2001, Kotze & du Plessis 2003, George 2007, McCulloch 2009, Davies 2012) and the provision of student services (Keeling 2008, Boyd 2011, Andrews & Eade, 2013, Seifert & Burrow 2013). The nature of the relationship is one of creative cooperation and

mutual construction of the educational experience, rather than a simple relationship of buyer and seller (Newson 2004, Redding 2005, Servage 2009).

Arat (2011) summarises the main features of the dichotomy in Table 2 below. While the distinctions are not always as firm as his language suggests -- for instance international students or ones attending many private colleges may pay full fees -- he presents the key characteristics:

Table 2: Comparison of Characteristics of Two Views of the Role of Students

<i>Student-as-a-partner</i>	<i>Student-as-a-customer</i>
Active partner of education. Both student and the lecturer participate in education.	Passive consumer, receiver.
Institutions of higher education select the students with required qualification.	Service provider does not restrict the purchase of the customers.
Students do not pay the entire cost of the education. Tuition fees are subsidised in full or partially by parents, government and private scholarships, tax payers, donors and student loan givers.	Customers purchase with their own funds.
Students are regularly assessed, and the failed students could not move to the next stage of education.	Customers' eligibility is not assessed.

Source: Arat (2011)

Some observers have gone further, identifying that the learning process itself is not simply constructive but iterative, and is cast in relation to what is already known by the learner and others. This is especially true for the role of the student as a research apprentice and the active role students play in creating new knowledge (Taylor & Wilding 2009, Govender 2012). A further approach that has gathered considerable interest is the notion of a “community of practice” in learning (Lave & Wenger 1991), where

the learning process is not seen as delivery or production, but as induction. It is the journey learners take on their way to becoming active participants and practitioners.... The emphasis is on building relationships – not only between teachers and students, but between students and other students. (Streeter & Wise 2009 p.5)

Therefore, more than just a partner in the process, the student *is* the key partner because it is the student that achieves the learning (Halbesleben *et al.* 2003, Williams, J. 2013). As Murphy & Brown (2012), for instance, suggest: “Learning is always the result of a relational activity from which the subject is continually being recreated through intersubjective processes that shape identification through a process of self-other recognition” (p.645).

Similar debates have occurred in other areas of public service delivery. The role and contribution of the users of many types of service organizations are increasingly being examined (Mills & Morris 1986, Jung 2010). Librarians have debated how technological changes have altered their relationship with their patrons (Phipps 2001, Kiran & Diljit 2011, Long 2012, Walton 2012). Medical

practitioners have argued over what role their patients play as customers (Albanese 1999, Neuberger 1999, Deber *et al.* 2005) and examined how the influence of neo-liberalism has affected the patient-doctor relationship (Lupton 1997).

Defining Student Consumerism

Within the discourse on *student consumerism* the term itself is variously used. The term obviously relies on the broader concept of “consumerism” as applied to the behaviour of customers engaged in commercial transactions as buyers of products and services sold in the marketplace. In that context, Assadourian (2010) defines consumerism as “the cultural orientation that leads people to find meaning, contentment, and acceptance through what they consume” (p.3).

With reference to students in higher education, the term can be applied negatively such as by Trout (1997): “students who think of themselves as customers only when it is convenient (like shopping), expect satisfaction regardless of effort, want knowledge served up in ‘easily digestible, bite-sized chunks’ and assume that academic success, including graduation, is guaranteed”(p.50). Or the term can be applied positively, such as by Coaldrake (2002a) who urges institutions “to recognize the legitimate ‘consumer’ rights of students ... and be more professional in their dealings with students” (p.1).

Harris, M. (2009) offers a definition that clearly mirrors the dichotomy of student-as-consumer verses student-as-coproducer: "A set of behaviours and attitudes displayed by students that imply that because they are the purchaser of educational services they are entitled to various educational rewards regardless of actual earned achievement" (p.90).

However, the term *student consumerism* is rarely defined in the literature either by commentators or by researchers. Instead the label is assumed to have a readily apparent usage and to require no precise delineation of what it means (Mercedes *et al.* 2007). Also, the terms "consumer" and "customer" are used quite interchangeably by authors even within the same document. For example, Harris, M. (2009) offers a definition that links both terms when he says, "I use the term student consumerism to describe the actions, behaviours, and beliefs of students and institutions to position students as customers of higher education" (p.90).

However, unpacking the meaning of the term student consumerism is worthwhile because it reveals the complexity of the relationship that students actually do have with their institutions (Hoffman & Kretoivics 2004, Nordensvard 2011). Indeed, even the singular term "student" can mask the fact that students have multifaceted relationships with their institutions (Marzo *et al.* 2007, Ng & Forbes 2009). For example, Mintzberg (1996) distinguished four different "hats" that students wear. These are presented in Table 3.

Students and their sponsors (for example, parents and government loans) make a considerable monetary investment in postsecondary education, and

like other investors seek a payoff for that investment. In this respect, some have argued the relationship between the student and university is more accurately framed as a stakeholder – beneficiary one (Cooper 2002) where students benefit from rather than consume education and universities have a stake in the student's beneficial outcome. And the shift towards students paying a greater share of the cost of their education is largely based on the view that they are the major beneficiaries of that education (Shanahan & Jones 2007, Browne 2010, Norton, 2012).

Others have pushed the metaphor further by suggesting the role of *student-as-product* because education involves moulding the student to fit the shape of the curriculum or the profession (Emery *et al.* 2001), and even that the professor can be viewed as the customer of assignments and other learning products that the student produces (Emery & Tian 2002). Perversely, some authors have even advocated the metaphor of *student-as-pawn* because students are seen as captive to the agendas of government policy with respect to employment outcomes and funding priorities (Tight 2013). The pliability of the student-as-consumer metaphor was even more stretched by Gross and Hogler (2005) who suggested the metaphor cast a “shadow” over institutions by placing the needs of students above those of other stakeholders of higher education.

Clearly, students are not the only customers of higher education. Parents and employers frequently finance the tuition fees and other expenses for students and are interested in the return on their investment (Hamilton 2013). Corporate sponsors who subsidise sports teams, theatrical productions, or academic

Table 3: Types of Relationships Students have with Institutions

<i>Student-as-customer</i>	when students purchase specific items on campus, such as accommodation, meals, and books. They purchase these for a monetary price even if it is subsidised.
<i>Student-as-client</i>	when students use facilities such as computer laboratories or library services or when they receive administrative services or support services such as like counselling and advising. These are usually free of cost if a student ID card is presented.
<i>Student-as-labourer</i>	when students work to complete assignments and projects. Sometimes they may do volunteer work or paid employment on campus as well.
<i>Student-as-partner</i>	when students contribute their opinions or experiences when they participate in classes or projects and when they present new ideas or create new knowledge in partnerships with other students and faculty.

Source: Mintzberg (1996)

scholarships have an interest in marketing or prestige benefits (Diaconu & Pandelica 2011). Governments who provide capital, operating and research

grants are interested in seeing outcomes that justify public expenditure and account for society's economic gain and public good (Mulnix 1990).

The relationship students have with higher education is further complicated because students themselves are part of the product that is being produced and sold (Maringe 2011). Unlike most other roles as customers in a marketplace, students are evaluated on their consumption to determine if they have benefited sufficiently. Students are then graduated with a credential that acts as a seal of approval, certifying to employers and others that the student has a newly-minted identity. Levin (2005) even documents how colleges in response to neo-liberal pressures are marketing their students as *commodities* to business and industry. Furthermore, higher education institutions are also interested in their own alumni as a source of donor funds (Rashid & Raj 2006, Gallo 2012).

Therefore, an adequate definition of student consumerism needs to situate itself within the dichotomy of the student-as-consumer versus the student-as-co-producer but also to recognise the context within which students have multifaceted roles in higher education and that where they are "consumers" this is often in a different relationship to other goods or services they purchase in the marketplace.

Measuring Student Consumer Traits

If students do act as consumers of higher education and if they are seeking a more customer-focused response from such institutions, one would expect to find

evidence of this in their attitudes and behaviours towards their education. These attitudes and behaviours can be considered as *traits* of student consumerism. These traits are elements of consumerism that indicate a student's overall dispensation to see education from a consumer perspective. From the aforementioned literature that has debated the concept of student consumerism -- and pitted it against the notion of student as co-producer -- a picture emerges where students exhibiting a consumer orientation are more likely to be passive and unmotivated, to see themselves as entitled to a good outcome, to be less engaged with academic staff, to be more willing to cheat, and more willing to complain and demand redress if they feel the service they receive is lacking. From this picture, therefore, a series of variables (traits) emerges:

- *The effort students devote to their education*
- *The level of engagement of students in their studies*
- *The achievements that students earn*
- *The interaction of students with academic staff*
- *The willingness of students to cheat*
- *The willingness of students to complain and litigate*

Fortunately, there is much empirical data available on these variables, in several countries, and the data is frequently longitudinal, consistently collected, often large scale, and generally conclusive. The next section summarises what is known about these variables.

a) *Are postsecondary students putting less effort into their studies?*

In the USA, Babcock & Marks (2010) report a 42% decline over fifty years in the number of hours students in US universities spent studying, down from 24 hours per week in 1961 to only 14 hours in 2010. This is based on self-report data from students and shows the demise occurred for all demographic subgroups, for employed and unemployed students, for all programme areas and all sizes of institutions. Although the study was limited to four-year colleges and full-time students only, there seems little reason to believe in general that part-time students in shorter length programmes are likely to devote a higher number of hours per week to their studies.

At the same time, students appear to be getting less from their higher education studies. Arum & Roksa (2011) studied over a four year period from intake to graduation more than 2,300 undergraduate students in the USA. They collected data from surveys and transcripts, as well as documented the performance of students taking the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The researchers found 45% of students “did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning” over the first two years and 36% did not improve their skills over the full 4 years. The main reason for these low gains, the authors posit, is the lack of academic rigour. The researchers found 32% of students each semester did not take any courses with greater than 40 pages of reading assigned each week, and 50% did not take a single course that requires more than 20 pages of writing per semester. Arum & Roksa conclude that many students are drifting

through college without a clear sense of purpose. Part of the reason may be that students have unrealistic assessments of their own ability.

Several authors have commented on what they see as “dumbing down” the curriculum in higher education as a corollary – or even a response -- to the student-as-consumer phenomenon (Arum & Roska 2011). Clifton (2012) links this to reduced academic and social expectations of today’s university students. Jacoby (2008) sees this as part of a wider malaise that is lowering cultural standards in society generally. A generally less-prepared student population might be more likely to be dissatisfied with their higher education experience -- and be more likely to feel entitled and more likely to complain -- precisely because they may not realize how less prepared they were academically. Such a construct is described as the Dunning-Kruger Effect which states that people tend to generally overestimate their abilities, and this has a deleterious effect on people who are less competent because their lack of knowledge and ability robs them of the capacity to realize their lack of competence (Kruger & Dunning 1999). In essence, they are ignorant of their own ignorance.

Researchers have extended this work to examine, for example, self-assessments and social interactions. Ames & Kammrath (2004) found the origins of overestimates in self-assessment lay with narcissistic tendencies towards self-aggrandisement, and found that narcissism predicted overestimates of performance better than actual performance did.

b) *Are students less engaged in their own education?*

Australian research conducted by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education has found students increasingly desire a more detached relationship with their university (James 2002) by attending more part-time, blending study with employment, and spending reduced time on campus (McInnis 2001). In contrast, a large body of data based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) developed in the USA has established positive correlations between student's investment in time, effort and interest in learning or a range of positive outcomes such as achievement, retention and satisfaction (Trowler & Trowler 2010). However, there is a gap between expectations and reality. NSSE has found incoming students expect to do more school work than they actually do, they expect to participate in campus activities more than they do, and they expect their university experience to academically and socially enrich them more than it did (Kuh 2007). Data collected by the Canadian version of the survey show that although generally satisfied with their university experience, students in significant numbers feel dislocated from their universities, and this is true more for larger settings than on small campuses (Dwyer 2010).

However, research in the UK based on results of the National Student Survey, developed by Richardson *et al.* (2007) shows that student satisfaction rates are malleable. The survey has been administered annually since 2005 and asks final year undergraduates to provide feedback on their courses. Data from the reports show student satisfaction levels rising annually and reaching a record 84%. Similarly, approaches using action research to assess and influence the

undergraduate experience have reported favourable results in Canada (MRAS 2012) using the assessment seminar method pioneered at Harvard University (Light 2001).

c) *Has the distribution of student grades changed?*

In Canada, the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC 2010) found that 70% of first year university students reported having an A- average or above in high school. This compares with only 40% in 1980 and is much higher than the 5% historical distribution for A grades calculated by Côté & Allahar (2007). In the USA, Rojstaczer & Healy (2012) collected data on letter grades awarded to students at more than 200 institutions over the past 70 years. The researchers found the A grade has become the most common one issued on campuses in the USA today, at 43% of all grades reported. This has risen 12% since 1988 and 28% since 1960. The results were consistent at selective and non-selective institutions, but the researchers found that private schools were more lenient than public ones, and colleges in the southern states and programmes in science and engineering graded more harshly than others.

There is evidence that students favour classes where they expect to earn higher grades (Johnson, 2003). For example, researchers Bar, Kadiyali & Zussman (2009) found that when Cornell University began publishing median course grades on the Internet in 1998 there was a subsequent increase in enrolment in courses that were more leniently graded and this tendency was stronger among

students with lower academic ability. The study also found that this behaviour accounted for a significant amount of the grade inflation experienced overall by the university during that period.

In the UK, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2012) reports yearly the number of qualifications awarded by universities. The Students and Qualifiers data sets show the percentage of superior undergraduate degree classifications has increased annually since 1995. For instance, 7% of all graduates in 1995/96 achieved first class honours, but by 2008/09 the number being awarded this degree had doubled to 14%. During roughly the same period, the proportion of students awarded upper second class degrees increased from 40% to 48% while those receiving a lower second class declined from 35% to 29%.

Stone (1995) reports on a study of grade distribution in the state of Tennessee which found that 15% of today's college graduates "would not have earned a diploma by mid 1960s standards" (p.1), but rather than blaming students, he points to enrolment pressures, budget decisions and other bureaucratic disincentives to tackling the problem of grade inflation. In contrast, Boretz (2004) reviewed the literature on grade inflation and found there was evidence of improvement in grades, but she dismissed this as not being caused by student consumerism and suggested it was rather due "a rise in faculty development programs and increased student support systems" (p.42).

Others, such as Young (2011), claim much of the problem with grade inflation, in North America especially, is that professors have difficulty being

independent in their grading. Whereas Cannally (2012) argues that the grades themselves have become more important for everyone than the education they are purported to represent:

Grading has become the core function of the modern system of higher education. Nearly every process in the university relies upon grades from matriculation, class enrollment, financial aid and graduation, to departmental accreditation and a school's reputation (p.1).

d) *Are students more demanding of academic staff?*

Some academic staff definitely perceive they are facing more consumerist attitudes among the students in their classrooms (Burge 2007, Hagedorn *et al.* 2007, Fullerton, 2013). For example, a survey of university personnel in Australia found 91% of participants agreed with the statement that students see themselves as consumers of higher education and 86% agreed with the statement that students now have higher expectations of universities (Jackson *et al.* 2009). Baum & Brown (1980) found that students negatively evaluate academic staff who do not display typical customer service traits, such as friendliness, understanding and support.

But do students perceive they are demanding more in academic staff performance? Based on qualitative data collected at an American university, Titus (2008) found "The teaching that students rate highly is what satisfies their desires, and the students want educational experiences that they enjoy" (p.402). Hartman (2012) found in the USA that men were significantly more likely to have a sense of entitlement and exhibit more demanding behaviours than women. Gudlaugsson

(2009) in Iceland found students in private universities to be more demanding than those attending publicly-funded ones.

In the UK, Tricker (2003) describes how new generations of learners and advances in technology for the delivery of education have changed student expectations, and a national project has advised on how universities can manage student expectations more deliberately (The 1994 Group 2010). The widespread use of on-line sites such as *RateMyProfessors* and social media sites such as *FaceBook* have created outlets to observe expressions of student dissatisfaction (Felton *et al.* 2008). Gregory (2011-12) found students actually favour professors who are “demanding, yet helpful and attentive” and classes that are “rigorous, fair and informative” (p.169).

e) *Are students more willing to cheat?*

Chapman & Lupton (2004) suggest that “Academic dishonesty in postsecondary education is a widespread, insidious and global problem” and their own research comparing students in the USA and Hong Kong supports that conclusion. In the UK, the Office of Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) reported that cases referred to the OIA relating to plagiarism had doubled in the period 2008-2011 and it “appears to be a growing problem” (OIA 2011, p.6). The problem of plagiarism is also widespread across courses in the European Union (Glendinning 2014) although Richardson (2015) notes that the extent of the problem is obscured because formal documentation is lacking in most countries.

In Canada, Jurdi, Hage & Chow (2011) studied undergraduate students' self-reported engagement in acts of academic dishonesty from 321 undergraduates at a public university. Over 50% of respondents said they had engaged in at least one type of dishonest behaviour during their university career.

In the USA, research confirms similar trends in increased cheating (Child 2005). Lahm (2008), for example, reported on his experiences prosecuting cases of plagiarism at a college of business in the USA. Over the previous four semester period, he reports the total number of cases has risen exponentially, with the final semester having more cases than the previous three combined. Earlier work by McCabe *et al.* (2001) reviewed a decade of research on academic dishonesty in higher education in the USA and found that "cheating is prevalent and that some forms of cheating have increased dramatically in the last 30 years." They also found that "although both individual and contextual factors influence cheating, contextual factors, such as students' perceptions of peers' behaviour, are the most powerful influence" (p.219).

Indeed, while academic dishonesty such as plagiarism or cheating in exams may not seem directly connected to student consumerism, Kleiner & Lord (1999) point out that the rise in cheating generally in education has coincided with increased consumerism behaviour. They suggest that exacerbating the issue is a shift in students' values that view cheating as acceptable because it is widespread. For example, McCabe *et al.* (2012) offer the following comment from a student: "I think the problem of academic dishonesty runs rampant throughout the campus...the general attitude seems to be that everyone cheats. Since everyone

does it, it's okay (p.4).” Eckstein (2003) also links academic dishonesty to greater competition among students to succeed:

Among the many causes [of academic dishonesty] are increasing participation in formal education and competition to gain credentials for educational, occupational and social advancement. Competition has in fact intensified as a concomitant of the expansion of opportunities for advancement. (p.14)

However, Child (2005) suggests a connection between student cheating behaviour and the way the education system is actually structurally reinforcing the phenomenon. A former writer for an online essay mill, Child argues that a preoccupation with grades, deadlines, right answers and other “products” in the education system actually ignores the intellectual “process” of learning. She adds: “The term paper industry profits from our nation’s embrace of an education system in which the product of students’ efforts is perceived as more important than the process the student uses to create the product” (p.5).

f) *Do students more readily complain and litigate?*

While there has been considerable research into consumer complaint behaviour in the marketplace (Singh & Pandya 1991, Keng *et al.* 1995, Liu *et al.* 1997, Buttelli 2007), little formal investigation of student complaint behaviour has been done in a higher education context (Hart & Coates 2010), despite recognition of the need for universities to handle complaints effectively (Dolinsky 1994,

Kessler 2009) and that students have legal rights as consumers (Buchanan & Lamb 1980, Kamvounias 1999, Varnham 2001).

In the UK, a study conducted by the *Times Higher Education Supplement* using data acquired under the Freedom of Information Act revealed that the number of complaints and appeals at 104 institutions rose from 6,796 cases in 2003 to 8,682 cases in 2004, an increase of 28% (Baty & Wainwright 2005). These cases were handled internally by the universities, but Harris, N. (2007) noted the procedures varied widely. An external appeal mechanism through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) was established by the British government in 2005. The office handled 1,605 complaints during 2011, an increase of 20% over the previous year and this was the sixth successive year of increase with approximately a 200% rise in complaints received since 2005. The OIA's 2012 report links this trend directly to student consumerism: the "...increase in complaints on the previous record year reflects a well-established trend which is likely to be accentuated by the doubling and trebling of tuition fees scheduled (in England) for autumn 2012" (p.2).

No central office exists in Canada to handle student complaints and comparative data on internal appeals conducted by institutions is uncollected (Sarna 2007). However, Mullens (2008) states "There is a growing tide of litigiousness on Canadian campuses" but only offers anecdotal evidence such as: "Take the student who took the University of Winnipeg to small claims court when he got a B+ rather than an A. Or the student who sued the B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education for \$1.5 million when it stopped payment on his student

loan and demanded repayment after he dropped out of Dalhousie University without telling anyone.” However, a recent decision by the Ontario Court of Appeal indicates the courts are steadily pushing the boundaries of when students can sue institutions (Knelman 2012). In the USA, litigation tends to be more frequent than in Canada generally. Melear (2003) explains how the legal contract between students and their colleges has evolved in the case law from paternalism to accountability. He analysed 130 examples of federal and state cases of students suing in higher education. Based on his analysis, he concludes:

In its contemporary manifestation, contract theory has provided students an outlet to seek redress against their colleges and universities that was previously unavailable. Now characterized as consumers, students have certain and precise expectations of collegiate performance, and they actively seek judicial relief through contract theory for perceived abrogations of these expectations. (p.138)

g) *Have the reasons why students pursue higher education changed?*

In the USA, surveys conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP 2012) annually over the past 46 years have documented the reasons students give for attending college (Astin 2008, Pryor *et al.* 2008). In the 2011 survey 86% of incoming students said that “to be able to get a better job” is “very important” in their decision to attend college. However, until 2006, prior to the current recession, “To learn more about things that interest me” was the most likely reason given by students.

In Canada, the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC 2010) since 1994 has coordinated, every three years, surveys of undergraduate students

enrolled in member institutions. The 2010 survey asked nearly 12,400 students to rate the importance of eight reasons for enrolling in university. Nearly all students (99%) rated at least one of the choices as “very important” in their choice and future employment stands out as the most significant of these. Around two-thirds of students reported that either *preparing for a specific job or career* (43%) or *getting a good job* (24%) is the single most important reason for entering higher education.

Similarly, another Canadian national survey conducted by the financial aid agency StudentAwards.com (2010) questioned over 1,000 high school and postsecondary students about their educational objectives, expectations, and experiences. Results show students state they are pursuing higher education in order to get a job and set the foundations for a career. Out of twelve possibilities, over 90% of respondents selected “career preparation” and “job quality” as a specific objective of education. In contrast, only 12% of surveyed students selected “self-enlightenment.” When asked what they wanted additionally from their education, a career-focused theme emerged. Students want to build academic and professional networks. They want to evolve into contributing members of the workforce. They want to know they are capable of supporting a family. Interestingly, while students believe that their parents share their goal of getting a job after graduation (79%), they feel the same is not true of their teachers. Instead, 70% of respondents indicate that their teachers believe the point of higher education is to enlighten the mind.

- h) *More generally, have students changed in their orientation towards higher education and its outcomes for them personally?*

Levine and Cureton (1998) present a comprehensive portrait of college students in the USA based on a five year study. They conducted annual multi-campus interviews throughout the 1980s and early 1990s with chief student affairs officers at 270 campuses and 9,100 undergraduate students from a wide range of institutions. They found a pronounced shift had occurred in college attitudes, values and beliefs regarding their education and the future compared to the researchers' earlier study (Levine, 1980). Their data present a portrait of a generation of students caught between anxiety about doing well personally and doing well socially. However, this portrait does not provide evidence of widespread consumerism among students; instead it illustrates a transitional generation of students caught between the inwardly focused "me generation" and the rapidly changing world.

In a sequel study, Levine & Dean (2012) find similar themes in the current generation of undergraduates but with notable differences. Based on similar methodology to the previous study, the researchers portray a generation "trying to precariously balance between their dreams and hopes for the future and the reality of diminished prospects." However, the authors find that today's students are not as involved in college life as their predecessors.

Studying Student Consumerism *Per Se*

Despite over forty years of interest in the topic of student consumerism, in various corners of the globe, most of the specific literature on student consumerism does not present the results of empirical investigation. Instead it relies on personal opinion and observation or provides general commentary that often serves political or rhetorical purposes rather than scholarly endeavours.

Indeed, Saunders (2011) concluded:

literature in this area as a whole falls quite short of providing an understanding of the rise of the conceptualization of students as customers, the extent to which this conceptualization is embraced by students, and the extent to which the theoretical implications of the student-as-customer identity actually exist. (p. 66)

Nonetheless, some empirical research has been conducted and the following section provides a detailed summary of these studies to present an emerging picture of what has been established to date about the general phenomenon of student consumerism. That information is grouped chronologically but also organized into seven groups of common foci: (a) studies of students' attitudes and orientation, (b) studies of student decision-making, (c) studies of academic staff perceptions and reactions, (d) studies of marketing strategies, (e) studies of non-academic staff, (f) studies of institutional response, and (g) studies comparing responses in different countries.

a) *Studies of Students' Attitudes and Orientation*

Most research, not surprisingly, has concentrated on students and the extent to which they are viewed as oriented towards consumerism. Riesman (1980) produced the first seminal work on student consumerism called *On Higher Education: The Academic Enterprise in an Era of Rising Student Consumerism*. This work explores the central dilemma between what a student "wants" and what a student "needs." Riesman presents examples of increasing behaviour by students in the USA demanding more say in their education, and being more willing to complain, to negotiate for grades and to seek litigation against institutions when they feel their needs have not been satisfied. Riesman also discusses how government policies have increased consumer protection for students through financial aid initiatives and new regulatory practices. The effect of this two-pronged assault on academia Riesman describes as a power-grab where the traditional autonomy of the institution -- and the authority of the academic staff to determine the educational experience -- are undermined and diminished. While Riesman does offer suggestions to remediate this imbalance and modify the juggernaut of student consumerism, these recommendations are not based on action research and his discussion of student consumerism is largely based on anecdotal evidence and discourse alone.

Delucchi & Korgen (2002) sought to provide some empirical basis to the largely anecdotal nature of the literature on student consumerism. They surveyed student attitudes to determine to what extent students have adopted a customer service orientation. A sample of 195 sociology students at a large university in the

USA completed a 41 item questionnaire in class. The researchers found most students reported spending less than half the number of out-of-class hours studying that academic staff recommend, and that almost half of respondents felt entitled to a credential since they were paying for one. Almost three-quarters of the students agreed they would take a class if it was an easy credit, even if they learned little. And over half the students felt it was the professor's responsibility to keep them attentive in class.

The researchers state the findings are evidence that "support the characterization of a student culture subscribing to the idea that higher education operates as a consumer-driven marketplace" (p. 104), and are quick to advise institutions to stand firm and protect the rigour of academia from being diluted by the low intellectual expectations of a new generation. However, the results of the study are less conclusive than the authors assert. The questionnaire used only a three point Likert scale and often over 20% of students rated themselves as "unsure." When the number responding "unsure" is added to the total who "disagreed," the overall picture is far murkier than claimed by the researchers. In addition, although the survey collected data about how the students viewed themselves as students, no cross-tabulations were reported to show whether the students who studied the least or saw themselves as less-than-stellar students were more likely to feel entitled to a degree, for instance. And the authors take hope in the fact that most of the students, when asked which of 12 types of people they wished they were more like, chose students who were concerned about studying and keeping up with course work. However, the authors do not draw

the conclusion that this finding suggests the consumer attitudes of the students in the study may not be a stable phenomenon. Rather than asserting their consumer rights, the students may be trying to navigate their way through a landscape where the cost/benefit analysis is complicated.

White (2007) explored the impact of “academic capitalism” on students in Australia and how students perceived the changes in their higher education environment. She interviewed 79 full-time students across five campuses in a variety of programmes but deliberately excluded from the sample new, mature, international, honours and graduate students because “their status had the potential to raise additional and extraneous status-specific issues”(p.596).

Analysis of the interview data revealed two key themes. First, students were responding negatively to the impersonal nature of larger classes, reduced contact with academic staff, and fewer resources focused on teaching. Second, students in their responses frequently adopted stances consistent with consumer attitudes, such as expecting lecturers to motivate them, willingness to challenge grades, wanting effort not just achievement to be rewarded, and devoting minimal time to study. White concludes that students are responding to their changing environment by viewing higher education through the lens of an “exchange relationship” where payment for services increasingly demands a consumer satisfaction. However, her study did not explore the dynamics of that view and her analysis of her data does not provide much insight into the factors influencing students’ perceptions.

Recognizing that the student as customer model is poorly researched because we do not know how many students -- or how strongly students -- perceive themselves as consumers, nor how the model correlates with student outcomes, Finney & Finney (2010) set out to fill these gaps. A sample of 1,025 American university students completed a 53 item questionnaire in class designed to provide demographic information and data on students' views on entitlement, satisfaction with the university, attitude towards complaining, and involvement with education. The results were mixed. Students who paid a greater portion of the cost of their studies were not more likely to view themselves as customers. However, those students with consumer attitudes did feel more entitled to positive outcomes and were more likely to make complaints; older students were more likely to have consumer attitudes. While findings showed that satisfied students are more likely to be involved in their studies, this was not related to student-as-consumer perceptions. The researchers concluded that institutions may fare better focusing their efforts on building student satisfaction overall, rather than trying to satisfy consumer attitudes *per se*.

Bossick (2009) examined the extent to which student consumerism is prevalent on campuses and whether consumer attitudes and behaviours varied by type of institution. He surveyed samples of undergraduate students at three types of institution: baccalaureate college, master's university, and research university. All the institutions were in the same state in the USA. A total of 1,300 participants were randomly selected and they were asked to respond to an unsolicited email questionnaire. Items were analysed by multiple regression and analysis of

variance, and Bossick found “students at different institutions focus on different type of capital (i.e. cultural, economic and social), and students who lack academic enthusiasm differ greatly from those who embrace scholastic activity. Bossick concluded, “There appear to be multiple types of consumers in higher education, suggesting that student consumerism is more complex than previous studies indicate”(p.4).

Wattjatrakul (2009) explored whether differences exist in the attitudes of students as consumers in different types of educational programmes. He collected data from three higher education institutions in Thailand. Most of his 189 participants were graduate students but some students were undergraduates, and all were distributed in either business or technology disciplines. Questionnaires were used to collect most of the data but some informal interviews were also conducted. The quantitative data revealed statistically significant differences between graduate and undergraduate students, with the former agreeing more than the latter on the applicability of the student-as-customer notion. In addition, students in business programmes were more likely to view themselves as consumers than were students in technology programmes. However, the researcher acknowledges the results are inconclusive since the number of students in business programmes was much smaller than the number in technology programmes.

Nordstrom, Bartels & Bucy (2009) studied American students with consumerist orientations to see if they were more likely to be more demanding in the classroom than other students and exhibit disrespectful and disruptive

behaviour towards academic staff. The researchers surveyed 593 undergraduate students attending a large university. Three scales were used to measure attitude to incivility, consumerism, and narcissism. Regression analysis revealed that students "who held positive attitudes towards uncivil classroom behaviours were more likely to report engaging in such behaviours.... Those with a consumer orientation to the educational process also were more likely to act in uncivil ways... and students with narcissistic tendencies were more apt to behave uncivilly in the classroom" (p. 4). However, the impact of a consumerist orientation was less significant than students not seeing anything wrong with the poor behaviours themselves.

Saunders (2011) noted that "Although many scholars have written about the conceptualization of students as consumers, the extent to which students actually express a customer orientation is unknown" (p.3). To address this problem he devised an exploratory study to ascertain the degree to which students do in fact self-express a customer orientation towards their education. Saunders focused exclusively on incoming first year students at one university. Firstly, Saunders sought to examine whether there was evidence that the rise of neo-liberal ideology has influenced students to use "free market logic" where individuals adopt a cost-benefit approach intended to maximize one's human capital (Lemke 2001). Saunders analysed existing national data from the CIRP Freshman Survey from 1971 to 2009 -- a period Saunders asserts as coinciding with the rise of neoliberalism -- and compared it with specific local data for his university from the same survey. He found that students' goals and motivations did change

during the period: they increasingly ranked being financially well off as more important to them, and they rated the value of developing a meaningful philosophy of life as less important to them. These trends were consistent during the period and did not vary significantly with demographic differences. However, Saunders did find significant variation in responses for student's planned college major between arts and business and found significant differences across institutional type, most noticeably between private colleges with highly selective admissions, compared to those with low selectivity.

Secondly, Saunders created an 18 item questionnaire called the Customer Orientation Scale (COS) to collect new self-report data from incoming students. The questions were designed to elicit from students responses that measured how much they expressed a customer orientation to their postsecondary education. However, Saunders found that less than a third of respondents expressed any level of customer orientation and only 10% scored high enough to reveal a high level of customer orientation, while the rest had COS scores that actually rejected a customer orientation. Little variation was found among demographic characteristics for the students, indicating that orientation as a customer is not associated with race, gender, first-generation status or financial status, although Saunders found large significant variation in students who favoured a customer orientation and who had lower levels of intended involvement in university life. Saunders concluded that the literature on student consumerism "may be misrepresenting the omnipresence of this orientation in higher education... these results should give pause to scholars and researchers who discuss the customer

orientation as being embraced by all students" (p.182).

Vuori (2013) focused on students in Finland where domestic university undergraduates study without paying tuition fees. Vuori wished to explore whether in such an environment the metaphor of student-as-consumer had any prevalence. Although her sample size was small (15 participants), she found a range of responses which included students who believed they were consumers and felt this was an appropriate orientation to their role in a university education. She concludes: "Therefore, as this study suggests, tuition payment might be only one of the possible factors that the students' customer identification is attached to in a modern higher education organization." (p.185)

b) Studies of Student Decision-Making

One area where students are likely to calculate costs and benefits in their educational decisions is the initial choice of which institution of higher education to attend. Côté, Skinkle & Motte (2008) sought to evaluate Canadian high school students' perceived return on investment in their subsequent undergraduate studies. In a series of studies, the researchers administered an on-line questionnaire, based on items generated from focus groups and designed to measure perceptions of monetary and non-monetary returns on investments of time, effort and money. The first sample studied 704 college-bound applicants. Factor analysis of the resulting data was used to select 16 of the most robust items from an original list of 40 items. The second study followed a sample of 999

Grade 12 high school students who received the questionnaire and were contacted again six months later to determine whether they had followed through with postsecondary attendance or not.

The researchers found that students' perceived return on investment on higher education can be measured and does predict whether students follow-through with admission or not. Some students do make plans to attend postsecondary education based on their analysis of costs versus benefits and those who do are more accurate in their assessments. However, among those who are less accurate in their assessments are students with higher levels of anxiety about personal identity. From these findings the researchers posit a new phenomenon called the *perceptual horizon effect* whereby "prior experiences will broaden or narrow the future horizon that a person perceives for him/herself and that this perceived horizon is anchored in the subjective realm of identity" (p.78). Students with broader perceived horizons can visualize success and are likely to have more accurate and positive assessments of costs and benefits. Although the researchers do not make the connection, this theory raises questions about whether students with narrower horizons may exhibit more student consumerist attitudes.

Manthorpe *et al.* (2010) also investigated student consumer behaviour in the admissions process. They focused on data collected from a variety of sources including focus groups and 2,606 responses to online surveys of first year students in social work degrees in the UK, as part of a national programme to evaluate this qualification. Findings revealed that successful applicants were consulting a wide range of sources before making their decision to apply;

proximity to home was less important to younger age applicants, and reputation of the programme and the school were very important to applicants. The researchers conclude that their findings “lend support to the idea that many social work students are consumers, much like other students... Elements of rational action theory are evident in that decisions appear to be weighed between a number of factors, outlining the complexity of determining costs and benefits” (p.596). However, while this research may be useful to those designing marketing programmes to recruit new applicants, it does not provide much insight into the reasoning of students to behave in the ways the researchers report.

Harding (2012) undertook case study research with two cohorts of first-year social science students at an urban post-1992 university in England. The first cohort of 183 students received a questionnaire designed to examine the influences of various factors -- such as financial circumstances and approach to studying -- on student's academic performance. Harding found “a striking feature that emerged from the first cohort data was the very limited extent to which students were acting as the informed consumers of higher education advocated by politicians” (p.4). To investigate this finding a second cohort of 84 students received a survey with questions linked specifically to consumer behaviour in why students chose to attend the university.

Harding found that students were making choices about where to attend that were based not on perceived quality of the university, or on available comparative data (such as scores in the National Student Survey), but on other reasons such as proximity to home. Where students did rely on data, they tended to be from

higher socio-economic backgrounds. Harding concludes that “potential students are resisting the role of informed consumers that successive governments have advocated for users of public services” (p.7).

c) *Studies of Academic Staff Perceptions and Reactions*

Lomas (2007) focused on exploring the perceptions of academic staff towards their experience of consumerist attitudes and behaviours among their students in six universities in the UK. Lomas chose three institutions existing prior to 1992 and three new universities created after that date. Data was collected from 10 participants using semi-structured interviews. Lomas did not use surveys because he found in a pilot study this method “failed to yield detailed and informed comments” (p.36). Lomas found his participants generally rejected the student-as-consumer view because they saw education as being a different process than a commercial transaction. There was some variation in responses from different disciplines and different types of university but Lomas describes this as indirect. However, Lomas acknowledges that his sample size was so small that his conclusions are “necessarily tentative and they are illuminative rather than definitive” (p.42).

Plunkett (2011) studied student consumerism behaviour in the USA from the perspective of academic staff and how these academic staff responded to such behaviour. His qualitative case study of five academic staff involved asking participants in semi-structured interviews to reflect on their previous experiences

and incidents with students acting as consumers in the classroom environment. Plunkett found that academic staff were recognizing consumer behaviours among their students -- behaviours such as negotiating for specific grades, demanding extended timelines on assignments, and showing reduced expectations for the amount of effort to expend on their studies. Academic staff expressed concern over a lack of personal responsibility among their students and described generational differences in this behaviour with it being more noticeable among the youngest members of their classes.

Plunkett found that the most common reaction among academic staff was to be defensive and anxious when confronted by students, as well as a tendency for academic staff to acquiesce readily to student demands. Plunkett acknowledges that the small sample size of his data collection limits the generalizability of his results.

d) Studies of Marketing Strategies

Concomitant with the decisions students make to enter higher education are the various marketing strategies that institutions use to attract students to apply for admission. Molesworth & Scullion (2005), note that as higher education increasingly competes for students so institutions employ marketing campaigns that stress the enhanced employment outcomes for graduates who complete programmes, especially vocational ones. The researchers used focus groups to explore how 28 undergraduate students reacted to these campaigns. The results

revealed six sources of tension that students experienced, some were internal tensions (such as short-term versus long-term goals) and others were external (such as tutor-as-job-trainer versus tutor-as-academic). Molesworth & Scullion suggest that these tensions are exacerbated when students are led to focus too much on “getting a job rather than learning the subject” (p.221).

Davidson (2015) examined the content of university admissions handbooks at six universities in Ontario in the period 1980 – 2010. These documents are a commonly used form of marketing aimed at attracting new students. His study focused on how the content and its placement in the handbooks changed in ways that reflected increased corporatisation. Davidson found that depictions of academics and studying became less emphasised in the university handbooks during the period and were replaced by content depicting various positive aspects of the student experience as well as the advantages of attending a specific university. He concluded that current admissions handbooks “are selling a more corporatized version of the university: one that sells the experience rather than the educational outcomes” (p.210).

The influence of commercialisation in the marketing of institutions of higher education has been studied also outside the English-speaking world. Cardoso *et al.* (2011) performed a content analysis of national newspaper advertisements in Portugal of new degrees offered by universities during 2006-07 to determine if these revealed clues to institutions adopting strategies that were more attuned to students as consumers. The researchers confirmed their expectation that Portuguese institutions are displacing traditional marketing content with copy

and imagery that appeal more to students as consumers – such as emphasizing contemporary culture and omitting references to individual merit or effort. However, the researchers warn that it is unclear what effect these marketing thrusts have on student decisions to enrol: “The meanings ascribed to undergraduate degrees by students and their families... may constitute factors that strongly determine demand, subtracting the choice of undergraduate degree from market and consumption ‘classic’ laws” p.283.

e) *Studies of Non-Academic Staff*

Pitman (2000) researched the perceptions of non-academic support staff in an Australian university on their customer orientations towards students and academic staff. He interviewed 13 support staff in the Registrar’s Office five of whom were managers and eight were non-management personnel. Pitman found the support staff were much more likely to see the students as their customers than the academic staff, and to value their interactions with students more than they thought the academic staff did. Non-academic staff even perceived the academic staff to be a hindrance in providing the best service to students. To the extent that academic staff and university leaders were perceived by support staff to devalue the role support staff play in providing good service to students, the support staff were demotivated, although Pitman found many examples of the value of close interpersonal relations with academic staff that helped support staff do their job. However, the usefulness of Pitman’s research is limited by its small sample size within a single university.

Nealon (2005) looked at the provision of services to students in three postsecondary institutions in the USA along a continuum of integrated service delivery designed to improve customer service. She used a variety of data collection methods -- including document analysis, interviews, and direct observation -- as part of a multiple case study. Her findings indicate that the different institutions she studied existed along a continuum of efforts to improve customer service in their student services operations, efforts which were driven as much by the institutional desire to streamline and improve service quality, as by any actual student demand for improved service. Institutions themselves may be *creating*, rather than *reacting to*, student consumerism as they compete for students.

f) *Studies of Institutional Response*

What about research at the institutional level? To determine how institutions are responding to student consumerism, Levin (2005) explored how two community colleges, in Canada and the USA, have responded to increased pressure to adopt a more entrepreneurial approach to their mission in the face of increased competition for students, demand for more vocational programmes, and declines in financial and other support from government. He saw students at the nexus of the move to adopt a more corporate culture. He viewed them as increasingly consumer-conscious as they pay a greater portion of the cost of their education, and as they are increasingly treated as commodities by colleges who use student skills as products to be sold commercially to the business world.

From 100 interviews of academic staff, administrators, students, and support staff conducted between 1989 and 1998, Levin collected data designed to reveal what specific behaviours occurred at the colleges that were orientated to students as consumers and commodities. He found evidence that the colleges altered their recruitment efforts to admit students who could afford the increased tuition fees, eliminated remedial or other high cost programmes, oriented curricula towards economic ends and marketed the educational experience as a means to improved financial gain rather than intellectual gain. However, Levin does not examine whether there were any differences among the respondents in his sample and does not discuss how students in particular viewed these changes at the two colleges. Consistent with his other research (Levin 2001), Levin is interested in the institutional response as a whole. Therefore, despite focusing on the student as consumer and as commodity, the student voice is silent in his study.

g) *Studies Comparing Responses in Different Countries*

Darley & Johnson (1993) conducted a study of consumerism across four developing countries (Kenya, Nigeria, India and Singapore) to compare attitudes towards consumerism among these countries. Although their research used 305 university students rather than the general population, they were focused on views of consumerism generally, not the student-as-consumer. Therefore, their analysis is only tangentially relevant to this literature review, but the results obtained did support the theory of a "consumerism life cycle continuum" (Stampfl 1978), whereby more negative consumer attitudes tend to occur with

increasing levels of economic development among countries. While other research has not examined the existence of this life cycle theory in student consumerism, it may have traction in explaining variations in student consumer attitudes across different age groups and types of institutions.

McArdle-Clinton (2008) conducted surveys and in-depth interviews with 95 lecturers and 778 students in several countries (Ireland, Australia, South Africa and France). She was interested in how her participants viewed education as a market commodity. Her findings confirmed that students, acting in a postmodern environment, did favour a minimalist approach to their studies: many students lacked the essential texts in their courses, the students rarely consulted the texts they had and instead sought to have the lecturers package together notes and learning in small digestible chunks -- which she calls "capsule" education. They ranked knowledge third in importance, after a job and qualification, as the desirable outcome of their education. In contrast, she found the lecturers, acting in a modernist environment, felt the students did not put enough effort and interest into their own learning. The researcher also found that the forces driving the demand for a "capsule" approach to learning were external to her participants and reflected a broader drift towards greater consumerism in society in general.

Finally, one more study extended the focus of inquiry even more broadly. Hutton *et al.* (2011) decided to gauge attitudes among society in general towards the applicability of the customer metaphor in the provision of public services and to explore this using a multi-national cross-section of five countries. The researchers collected opinions from more than 1,500 students in universities and

colleges in the USA, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong and New Zealand.

Students were chosen as the sample because the researchers felt they were homogeneous across countries and more likely to participate in civic society than the rest of the public. Using focus groups, the researchers collected qualitative data about the students' beliefs about the notion of customers in public services. Additional data were collected from surveys administered on-line or in-person to students in the same countries.

The study found that attitudes varied widely across services offered by different types of public institution with 93% of respondents feeling that retail stores should treat people as customers, but the scores were much lower for public services: 60% for news media, 44% for medical treatment, 39% for government services, and 11% for religious organizations. Notably, the figures were 39% for higher education and 19% for compulsory education. The study found some differences across the five countries in participants' responses, but more significant was the finding that the appropriateness of the customer metaphor was seen to vary within an institution depending on the circumstances of the buyers who were viewed as customers with respect to voluntary wants (such as cosmetic surgery) but not with respect to necessary services (such as emergency care).

Need for More Research

Taken as a whole, the picture that emerges from these empirical studies is expansive but incomplete, and even unclear in some important respects.

The picture is expansive because the research has been conducted in several different countries (for example, Australia, Canada, Iceland, Portugal, UK, and USA) in different types of institutions (for example, large universities, and community colleges) with different sorts of participants (for example, students, academic staff, support staff, and administrators), with different kinds of data (for example, survey responses, focus groups, interviews, newspaper advertisements, and institutional documents), and with different purposes (for example, to explore perceptions, to quantify attitudes, to develop survey instruments, to examine content, and to compare different countries).

However, the picture is incomplete in several ways. First, studies have produced generally mixed results, with some showing students both do and do not exhibit consumer attitudes and behaviours to various extents, whether as reported by themselves or perceived by others. Second, the qualitative data obtained from interviews and surveys do not provide a rich understanding of how and why students are seeing themselves as consumers of higher education. Third, where quantitative data have been collected the instruments used often have a small number of response items or truncated response scales. Fourth, studies have not generally explored differences in the multiple forms of relationships that students have with higher education institutions. Fifth, studies have also not generally compared the responses of students and staff at the same institution or across different institutions to compare if these vary. Lastly, with the exception of two studies (Levin 2005, Côté *et al.* 2008) little is known about student consumerism in Canada.

The picture that emerges is captured well by Burge (2007) when she says ironically that “the attitude of consumerism in many students is well-established yet vaguely researched” (p.12). Similarly, Finney & Finney (2010) conclude:

In spite of its increasing popularity, the SAC’s [student-as-customer] impact remains unknown. Researchers have not ascertained exactly how many college students perceive themselves to be customers of their universities; nor have scholars measured how strongly students subscribe to these beliefs. (p.277)

Clearly more empirical work is needed to provide a fuller and clearer picture of how and why students perceive themselves to be student consumers, and that future research on student consumerism should include qualitative studies “that can provide a more comprehensive and meaningful description of a customer orientation and its impact on college students” (Saunders 2011 p.196).

Furthermore, research is needed that addresses the complexity and multiplicity of the consumer roles that students play both within and between different programmes and institutions. This need is reinforced by Naidoo & Jamieson (2005) in their article outlining a research agenda for further studying student consumerism in higher education when they suggest:

The relationship between commodification and the massification and democratization of higher education is an area that needs to be explored. An enduring limitation in relation to the social theory of higher education is that researchers have tended to conceptualize institutions of higher education in an overly homogenous way. However, as shown above, the outcomes of forces for commodification may differ substantially across different types of universities and subject areas. (p. 279)

The need for additional attention to student consumerism as a research topic is highlighted by Fairchild & Crage (2014) who argue this topic is central to our interest in the influence of marketisation in higher education generally:

Discussions of student consumerism exist in disparate forms, often without rigorous evidence, but nonetheless with wide reach and influence; student ideology is a critical aspect of broader debates about the effects of market forces on higher education. (p.403)

Conclusion

As a result of the literature review presented in this chapter, further research on the topic of student consumerism is justified in order to provide a clearer picture of how the phenomenon occurs. The literature review indicated that the lack of empirical research on the topic specifically points to the need for a study designed to provide primary source data, and that this should focus on how students experience and perceive themselves as consumers of higher education.

Given that some variation among students' perceptions has been noted in the previous literature, the study should include different types of students and different types of institutions. Furthermore, it is appropriate that the study be conducted in British Columbia (BC) because research on this topic is lacking in that region and the region has a highly integrated postsecondary system of credit-transfer among its institutions (Bekhradnia 2004).

Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated to guide the study and its methodology which is discussed next in Chapter 3:

1. *To what extent do students in postsecondary institutions in BC perceive themselves to be consumers of higher education?*
2. *In what ways do students in postsecondary institutions in BC perceive themselves to behave as student consumers?*
3. *Do perceptions and self-reported behaviours of consumerism vary among students in different programmes and different types of postsecondary institutions in BC?*

As a conclusion to the literature review outlined in this chapter, it is possible to sketch a rudimentary conceptual model of student consumerism as it has been studied so far. This model is not intended to be overly definitive, nor to detract from the exploratory nature of this study, but merely to draw various key threads together in the literature so that a summative picture of the story so far can be encapsulated for the reader.

This conceptual model of student consumerism is depicted in Figure 1 below. The diagram presents the manifestation of consumer behaviour as a series of consumer traits such as the ones reviewed in this chapter. Those include, for example, the research into the amount of effort that students are exerting on their studies carried out by Babcock & Marks (2010), Arum & Roska (2011), Clinton (2012) and others reported in this chapter. It also includes the research into students' willingness to cheat carried out by Chapman & Lupton (2004), Child (2005), Jurdi, Hage & Chow (2011), McCabe *et al.* (2012) and others reported here.

Do Students Behave as Consumers?

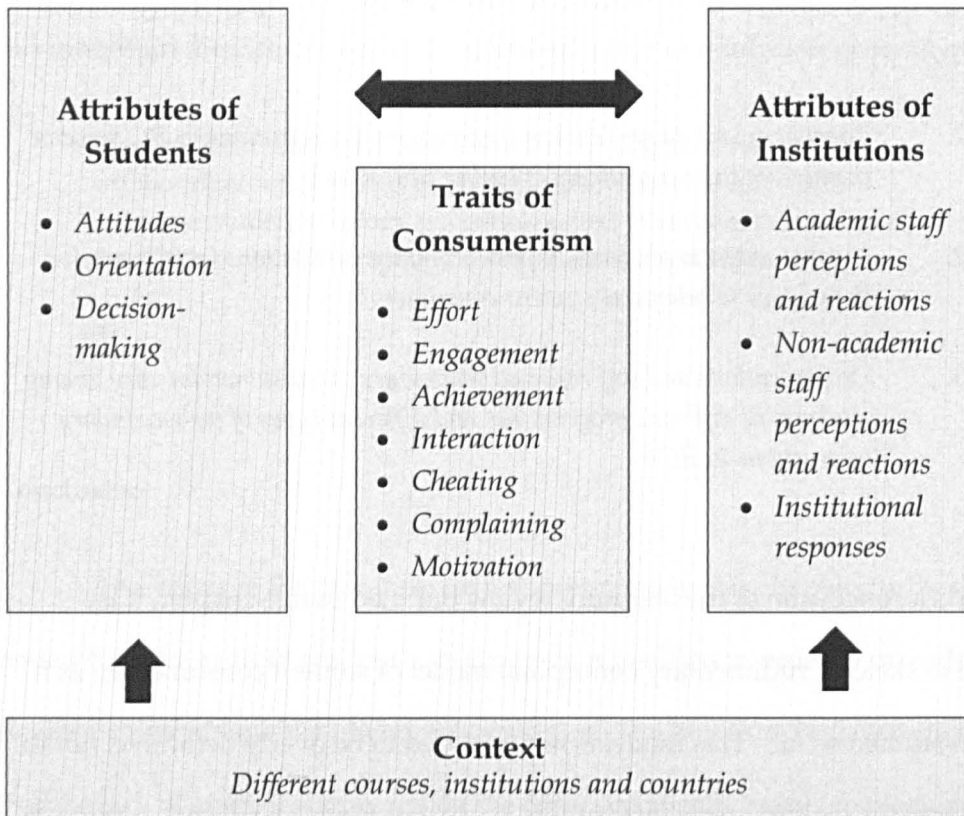


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Student Consumerism

The extent to which these traits of consumer behaviour occur is shown in the diagram as a function of the influence of two sets of attributes. First, there are the attributes of the students themselves. Several researchers were discussed in this chapter who have explored these student attributes in relation to student consumerism: for example, the work of Riesman (1980), Delucchi & Korgen (2002), White (2007), Finney & Finney (2010), Bossick (2009), Watjatrakul (2009), Nordstrom, Bartels & Bucy (2009), Saunders (2011) and Vuori (2013).

Second, there are the attributes of post-secondary institutions. These include, for example, the perceptions and reactions of staff. The work of several researchers who have examined such attributes were discussed in this chapter: Lomas (2007), and Plunkett (2011) examined those of the academic staff, while Pitman (2000) and Nealon (2005) studied those of non-academic staff.

Finally, the diagram shows that the conceptual model of student consumerism emerging from the literature review presented in the chapter should include the influence of the context of the post-secondary environment in which the student consumer behaviour occurs: the behaviour is likely to be influenced by variables such as the different courses that students are taking, and the different types of institutions, as well as the educational system in different countries. For example, the work of the following researchers examining the variability among different countries was reported by Darley & Johnson (1993), McArdle-Clinton (2008) and Hutton *et al.* (2011).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The following chapter explains and justifies the research methodology used in this doctoral research study.

This section explains the purpose of the research, the research design and methodology adopted, and the research questions that were framed from this perspective. The research participants are described next, including how and why the participants were selected. Then the data collection methods of the focus groups and individual interviews are explained along with the list of questions asked of the participants. The methods of data analysis are clarified and discussed, and then how the data was used to generate findings is described. This chapter concludes with three sections that discuss the validity of the research design, the various limitations of the research project, and finally the ethical considerations and ethics approval.

Research Purpose

The purpose of the research was to conduct an empirical study of students' attitudes towards the phenomenon of student consumerism using interviews and focus groups to generate qualitative data that can provide a picture of how, why and to what extent students perceive themselves to be consumers of higher

education in BC . The research drew from samples of students at institutions of different sizes and purposes, and from students in different programmes, to explore what differences appear to be related to these variables.

Through the use of focus groups and interviews, the study sought to explore the common beliefs, experiences, behaviours and expectations among different groups of current students attending postsecondary institutions in BC regarding student consumerism. The data collected in the focus groups and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a technique of data interpretation which seeks to determine what themes can be identified. From these themes, theoretical explanations to explain the data collected were developed.

Methodological Approach

The review of previous literature on student consumerism provided in Chapter 2 determined that while the topic has received considerable academic and popular discussion, there is a lack of empirical investigation of just how students in postsecondary institutions perceive themselves to be behaving as consumers of education and in what ways. As a result, this research study was conceived as exploratory in nature with the intention of investigating what could be learned from the students themselves by selecting research methods that would generate data to shed light on the phenomenon from their perspective.

Since the nature of the research was exploratory, the research used a qualitative approach which sought to generate data, from which themes and categories of human experience and behaviour can be understood, rather than to test hypotheses or to measure the occurrence of pre-determined elements or response categories (Patton 2010). The qualitative approach emanates from an interpretive paradigm of epistemology whereby knowledge is discovered rather than measured and which takes into account the totality of the phenomenon and its subjective meaning (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). The focus of qualitative research tends to be on words rather than numbers and it has an inductive, interpretive, and constructivist approach (Merriam 2009).

Qualitative research is fundamentally an interpretive enterprise that is designed to be context-dependent (Merriam 2009). It is philosophically and methodologically built or designed around the ability to co-construct the understanding of a phenomenon between the participant (insider) and researcher (outsider) in the study (Hellawell 2006). The results of qualitative research are descriptive rather than predictive and they do not permit extrapolations from the samples used to the populations they represent (Denzin & Lincoln 2011).

Research Design

Since the literature review outlined in Chapter Two indicated that the lack of empirical research on the topic specifically points to the need for a study designed to provide primary source data, the research study was designed to

collect exploratory data on how students experience and perceive themselves as consumers of higher education.

To explore students' experience and perceptions, the study was designed to collect data using interviews and focus groups to identify how and in what ways current students in post-secondary institutions in BC viewed their educational experiences in their courses.

Since variation among students' perceptions had been noted in the previous literature, the study was designed to include different types of students and different types of institutions. To provide a representative cross-section of students, participants were chosen from a variety of arts/sciences courses, business courses, and vocational courses in health sciences. These course areas are common across multiple institutions in BC. To provide a representative cross-section of institutions, participants were drawn from a public university, a public college and a private university-transfer institution.

Research Questions

Consistent with its exploratory approach rooted in an interpretive perspective, the study sought to generate data that could provide understanding of how and in what ways students may perceive themselves to be consumers, and how those perceptions may vary among diverse students.

To generate such an understanding, the research study sought to find responses to the following specific questions:

1. *To what extent do students in postsecondary institutions in BC perceive themselves to be consumers of higher education?*
2. *In what ways do students in postsecondary institutions in BC perceive themselves to behave as student consumers?*
3. *Do perceptions and self-reported behaviours of consumerism vary among students in different programmes and different types of postsecondary institutions in BC?*

The justification for the first two questions is directly supported by Finney & Finney (2010) who state: "Researchers have not ascertained exactly how many college students perceive themselves to be customers of their universities; nor have scholars measured how strongly students subscribe to these beliefs (p.277)." The justification for the third question is supported by Naidoo & Jamieson (2005) who assert: "the outcomes of forces for commodification may differ substantially across different types of universities and subject areas (p.279)."

Research Methods

In keeping with the exploratory nature of the study and the adoption of a qualitative approach to generate data that helps to illuminate the perspective of the participants, two forms of data collection methods were selected: focus groups and individual interviews.

Two methods were chosen because mixed method approaches strengthen the inferences that can be made by examining a phenomenon from more than one perspective. This increases corroboration of the data and renders less bias and more accurate conclusions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Focus groups are beneficial for exploring topics where the responses of participants can be easily influenced by the emerging conversation and where collective agreement or divergence can be illuminated. This can reveal the magnitude of the similarity or difference there is in the perspective of participants. However, in focus groups the individual tends to be subsumed within the group dynamic and so the use of one-to-one interviews can mitigate this to allow unrestricted access to the individual voice, and thus allow for the individual perspective of each participant to be heard. While both research methods are time-consuming to conduct, they generally produce a substantial data set for qualitative analysis afterwards.

Other research methods such as a survey questionnaire were not selected because of the exploratory and qualitative focus that arose from consideration of the literature review. The open-ended nature of the individual interviews and the

group dynamics of the focus groups were believed to be better suited to solicit the rich data that an exploratory approach required.

Focus Groups

One portion of the data for the study was collected using focus group methodology (Morgan, 1998). A focus group is defined by Powell & Single (1996) as "a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research" (p.499).

Focus group methodology permits the gathering of data well-suited to projects whose "goals are exploratory and discovery-oriented... [because focus groups] get at ... complex influences by encouraging participants to investigate the ways that they are both similar to and different from each other" (Morgan 1998, p.12).

Focus groups concentrate on the product of collective communication among participants. Kitzinger (1995) stresses the advantages that this method affords: "This means that instead of the researcher asking each person to respond to a question in turn, people are encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view" (p.299). This research method is especially valuable for exploring participants' knowledge and experience, and it also helps examine not just what participants believe but also why and how they do so (Barbour & Kitzinger 1999).

Focus groups were selected as an appropriate research method for this study because:

- The method generates considerable data collection within a short period of time that maximizes resource use.
- Participants discussing the topic together interact in ways that can generate insights among the participants that elucidates their perceptions.
- The use of a moderator helps to encourage participant's engagement and facilitate contributions from all participants.
- The method encourages participants to be involved in framing and directing the conversation and thus co-creating the data collected.

The focus groups were one hour in length and were conducted in a suitable room on each campus location. Five of the students in each of the nine categories of participants were assigned to a focus group; the other five were assigned to interviews. The discussion in the focus groups was audio-recorded for transcription later.

Individual Interviews

A second portion of the data for the study was collected using interviews. Interviews were used to explore in more detail the perceptions of individual students and to explore person-specific contexts. This augmented and extended the type of data sets that the focus groups generated and overcame one of the limitations of focus group research, as Morgan (1998) explains:

During the discussions in a focus group, you learn a great deal about the range of experiences and opinions in the group. You do not, however, learn all that much about each specific individual (p.32).

In addition, interviews are seen as an appropriate research method where depth of meaning is important and the research is primarily focused in gaining insight and understanding of a phenomenon (Gillman 2000).

Since an interview is a managed verbal exchange (Ritchie & Lewis 2003), its effectiveness relies substantially upon the communication skills of the interviewer (Cohen *et al.* 2011). Its use as a research method also assumes that the participants are sufficiently aware of -- and can articulate clearly enough -- their perceptions, beliefs and behaviours regarding the topic being researched (Seidman 2006).

Interviews were selected as a research method for this study because:

- They provide the opportunity to generate rich data.
- The language used by participants is essential to gaining insight into participants' perspectives.
- Contextual and relational aspects are significant to understanding the perceptions of participants.
- The data generated can be analysed in different ways.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted in a suitable office on each campus location. Five of the students in each of the nine categories of participants who were not selected for the focus groups were

assigned to an interview. The discussion in the interviews was audio-recorded for transcription later.

A semi-structured format (Lindlof & Taylor 2002) was used for the interviews. All the participants were asked the same questions as those given to the focus groups. As the responses were received, follow-up questions as needed were provided to explore the participants' responses to gain additional explanations, examples, or contextual information.

Appendix 3 provides a transcript of one interview from those conducted, as a sample of the interview process and the participant's responses.

Questions Posed to Participants

The interviews and focus groups used a semi-structured format to generate data intended to provide responses regarding the three central research questions of the study. A semi-structured format was chosen because it provides a basic framework of open-ended questions that provides a consistent approach to each interview or focus group. This approach is appropriate where the researcher believes that previous literature on the topic has generated sufficient understanding from which germane questions can be asked of the participants rather than the research needing to pursue a more open-ended approach designed to explore the research topic without any pre-conceived sense of what the data may be. However, a semi-structured approach is also sufficiently fluid and responsive so that the interviewer/moderator can allow the conversation to

generate its own path from the basic questions which act as initial prompts only. This allows the participant more involvement in where the conversation goes and allows the researcher to gain a clearer sense of the responses given by the participant and thus provides more insight into the topic from the participants' perspective.

To generate data that would allow for the exploration of the central research objectives, the following questions were operationalised for use in the focus groups and individual interviews. These questions were also designed to reflect what should be the focus of data collection as indicated by the literature review in Chapter 2, particularly the traits of student consumerism which the literature review had discussed:

1. Context

- Tell me about why you are a student at this time in your life.
- What do you want to achieve with your studies?
- How will you know that you are successful?

2. Consumerism

- What does the word "consumer" mean to you?
- Give me some examples of when you have been a consumer?

3. Relationship with institution

- Tell me about what the word "student" means to you?
- What relationship do you have with the institution?
- What do you think the institution expects of students?
- What do you think students expect of their institution?

4. Effort devoted

- How much effort are you devoting to your studies?
- What obstacles do you face?
- Do you think the institution expects more effort from you in your studies?

5. *Level of involvement*

- How involved are you in your studies?
- What difficulties do you face?
- What would cause you to be more or less involved in your studies?

6. *Achievements obtained*

- How successful are you being in your studies?
- How important are high grades to you?
- How do you expect to earn grades?

7. *Interaction with academic staff*

- What is your opinion of your professors?
- What contact have you had with your professors?
- What would you prefer your professors to do more of?
- What would you prefer your professors to do less of?

8. *Willingness to cheat*

- Under what circumstances would you be willing to cheat in your studies?
- What would you be willing to do and why?
- Do you see other students cheating? Why do you think they are willing to cheat?

9. *Willingness to complain and litigate*

- Give me an example of what sort of thing that could happen to you that would motivate you to make a complaint to the institution.
- How far would you be willing to take the complaint if at first you weren't satisfied with the response?
- Could you conceive of you ever suing the institution in court? What would motivate you to pursue this action in court?

These questions were used as the template for the semi-structured interviews or focus groups. The questions were not iterative: that is, they were not developed or refined as a result of the experience of previous interviews or focus groups by the researcher.

Examples of the data generated by the interviews and focus groups are provided in Appendices 3-5. These reveal how the transcript was analysed to provide initial codes (Appendix 3); how the text of these codes were then analysed into groups of concepts (Appendix 4); and how finally these concepts were amalgamated to form overall clusters (Appendix 5).

Pilot Study

An initial version of the proposed research was conducted as a pilot study to gain insight into whether the proposed research design and methodology for the main study were viable. The requirements for the Ed.D programme involve the doctoral candidate conducting an Initial Study in the first year. The purpose of this assignment is to clarify and consolidate the focus of the main research.

The pilot study used a limited but representative sample size of participants at a single post-secondary institution in British Columbia. The sample was 5 students enrolled in a business career programme and 5 students enrolled in undergraduate arts programme, for a total of 10 participants.

The pilot study allowed me to ensure that the various procedures had been well-constructed so that they generated the type of data that I sought in the main study. The experience of the pilot study, as well as its results, permitted modifications and amendments as needed to the research methodology in order to maximize the chances of success for the main study.

From the experience of conducting the pilot study and the results obtained, the following changes were made for the final study:

- Some of the questions asked of the participants were rephrased to make them easier to present to participants using expressions with less jargon.
- The analysis of the data was changed from grounded theory to thematic analysis (as explained on pages 97 – 101 below).

Research Participants

Since the literature review presented in Chapter 2 showed that student consumerist behaviour may vary substantially across different sorts of institutions and course areas, the participants in this study were drawn from a purposive sampling perspective as follows:

Three Institutions

As explained in Chapter One, there are various types of postsecondary institutions in BC. Colleges, for example, are comprehensive teaching institutions previously called community colleges but which now have a broadened mandate to offer undergraduate degrees in applied subjects, but not to provide any postgraduate degrees. Universities, in contrast, are larger institutions that tend to be more academically focused and research intensive. Private colleges are proprietary in nature and operate within a different ethos, drawing from different students.

Table 4: Overview of the Institutions Used for Data Collection

<i>Type</i>	<i>Mandate</i>	<i>Student Size</i>
Public College	This college offers Bachelor's degrees and general university arts and science courses, as well as career courses in health care, human services, business, and creative arts.	14,000 students
University	This university offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in arts, sciences and applied areas.	35,000 students (30,000 undergraduate and 5,000 postgraduate)
Private College	This private college offers undergraduate arts and sciences for students wishing to transfer to complete degrees at other institutions.	2,000 full or part-time students

The study used samples of 30 students each from 3 institutions that typically represent each of the types of institution mentioned above. To contain travel costs and to avoid regionality being a variable, the institutions chosen are located in the Lower Mainland metropolitan area of BC. For a map of this area see <http://www.educationplanner.ca/institution/gmap>

The Open University generally encourages research students to make anonymous both their participants and the institutions to which the participants belong. For this reason, I have created proxy names that identify the type of institution so that this is apparent to the reader because the landscape of BC postsecondary institutions exhibits a plethora of institutions that cater to and attract a variety of different students.

Three Course Areas

At each institution, students were solicited to participate in the study from 3 different areas that are typical of the range of courses offered by the institution:

<i>Public College:</i>	<i>10 students enrolled in business courses</i>
	<i>10 students enrolled in arts courses</i>
	<i>10 students enrolled in sciences courses</i>

<i>University:</i>	<i>10 students enrolled in business courses</i>
	<i>10 students enrolled in arts courses</i>
	<i>10 students enrolled in sciences courses</i>

<i>Private College:</i>	<i>10 students enrolled in business courses</i>
	<i>10 students enrolled in arts courses</i>
	<i>10 students enrolled in sciences courses</i>

These course areas allowed for some commonality among the participants in the study while also allowing for institutional variability.

Five of the students in each group were assigned to participate in focus groups and the other five students were assigned to participate in interviews (as explained below in the section called "Selection").

The total number of participants recruited for the study was 90 students.

Selection

The participants were recruited by an on-site research associate who canvased students in the relevant course areas via announcements in class at the beginning of the term or class. The research associates were teachers who agreed to let their course(s) be canvased for volunteers for the study. They introduced the researcher at the end of a class or before a break in the class and they then left the room so they were unaware which students volunteered for the study or not, so as not to compromise participants' involvement.

Volunteers who came forward were given an informed consent sheet to read and sign. The research participants were provided either with a gift voucher that could be used on campus or \$30 CAD (approximately £15). This was not intended as an inducement to participate but as recognition of their time and effort

in participating. The participants needed to make separate arrangements either to attend an interview or contribute as part of a focus group. This often involved a separate trip to campus on a day they would not ordinarily be in attendance and would involve additional transportation costs. The use of a gift voucher or money as compensation to participants was approved by the Research Ethics Board at each institution.

Analysis of Data

The original intention was for the study to analyse the information collected from participants during the interviews and focus groups using the methodology of a *grounded theory* approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Charmaz 2004). This approach had been taken during a pilot study to determine the feasibility of conducting the full scale research study that is reported in this thesis. While the pilot study was generally successful, it became apparent that the methodology of *thematic analysis* was more conceptually appropriate to the research study and this approach was used later in the main study. The reasons for the change are explained below.

Grounded Theory

The grounded theory approach was initially appealing because it is an approach to qualitative data that allows for concepts to emerge from the data that

help explain how participants view a phenomenon. Glaser (2009) argues that grounded theory (GT) is a very suitable research methodology for graduate researchers to employ:

GT is done best in the hands of the novice PhD and MA candidates because not only of their quest for relevancy, in the face of extant literature that does not fit, work or is not relevant, they are still open to "whatever", still enthusiastically learning... and their skill development fledgling status is uniquely suited to the skill development required in the GT process. (p. 1)

While grounded theory is an emergent research method (Charmaz 2008) and its process and techniques have been interpreted differently by various researchers, the basic components of grounded theory research as advanced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) are:

- Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis.
- Constructing analytical codes and categories from data,, not from preconceived logically deduced hypothesis.
- Using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis.
- Advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis.
- Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories and identify gaps.
- Sampling aimed towards theory construction, not for population representativeness.

- Conducting the literature view after developing an independent analysis.

Grounded theory involves making discoveries through the analysis of data. There are four phases to this analysis:

<i>Coding</i>	initial viewing to identify key points in the data
<i>Concepts</i>	codes of similar content are grouped onto concepts
<i>Categories</i>	relationships among similar concepts are grouped into broad categories
<i>Theory</i>	categories are linked into an overarching theory of "what is going on"

The data in the pilot study were collected as transcripts of the focus group conversations and the individual interviews. These data were transcribed from the audiotape recordings onto sheets of paper into columns half the page wide. The second half of the page was used to perform line-by-line coding (Charmaz 2004). Each subsequent data sample was reviewed in comparison with the previous one to employ constant comparison. During the data analysis process, a journal was maintained, alongside the data, in which to write notes which are essentially memos-to-self about emerging concepts and categories as the building blocks of reflection that lead to generating hypotheses that can explain the data. The memos were sorted and rearranged. These were then written up into explanatory text.

As a modification of classic grounded theory, the methodology of Charmaz (2008) was followed in the pilot study to employ grounded theory within a constructivist paradigm that views data and theories as being co-constructed by the researcher and participants.

The use of grounded theory did work successfully as a qualitative tool to analyse the data in the pilot study. Coding the data helped to determine concepts within the data, and this led to mapping some of their relationships. The relatively small sample of participants did not generate sufficient data to allow for the final stage of theory building.

However, there were some misgivings about the suitability of grounded theory because it is based on theoretical assumptions and procedures that did not seem to fit adequately with the way the research project had been designed. The two main concerns were:

- Grounded theory starts from the premise that the researcher should not have pre-conceived ideas about the phenomenon under investigation, but in the Open University doctoral programme, the assignments require that a fairly comprehensive review of the literature be undertaken prior to starting data collection. This meant that the researcher could not possibly have an innocent understanding or lack an awareness of how other researchers had studied the phenomenon. Indeed, the series of questions posed to the participants in the focus groups and interviews were semi-structured rather than fully open-ended, and the questions had been generated from the literature review.

- Grounded theory proceeds with an iterative process of data collection and data analysis where the researcher builds the data pool through data analysis informing what to look for in the next cycle of data collection. In contrast, this research study had pursued a generally linear process rather than an iterative one. Even though some data were collected and analysed before remaining data were collected, due to pressures of time, the research questions and approach remained unchanged.

As a result, the proposed research study did not appear to be sufficiently faithful to the theoretical assumptions and methodological procedures of grounded theory, even though the application of grounded theory varies among researchers -- even among its original proponents -- and modified versions are commonly used (Pidgeon & Henwood 1997). This matter was discussed with the supervisory team, and the decision was made to pursue an alternative type of qualitative analysis, that of thematic analysis, which fitted more suitably the design of the research study.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen to replace grounded theory as a more suitable methodology. Thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used types of qualitative methodology and it shares many features with grounded theory.

Both approaches are data driven (Price & Kirkwood 2014) and involve coding the data and generating and interpreting the broad patterns identified in the data pool. Although thematic analysis uses different terminology -- for example, "themes" rather than "codes" -- these differences do not obscure the fundamental similarities.

The key relevant differences between thematic analysis and grounded theory are as follows:

- Grounded theory is related to a particular philosophical position, whereas thematic analysis is not generally associated to a fixed epistemology or ontology. Thematic analysis is primarily a method, rather than a full methodology.
- Grounded theory aims to develop an overarching theory that explains why the findings are found in the data, whereas thematic analysis seeks to advance themes within the data without developing an explanatory theory.

Similar to other qualitative methods, including grounded theory, there are a variety of different approaches used under the umbrella term of "thematic analysis" even though they possess underlying similarity. The set of procedures developed by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2012, 2013) is very commonly used, but the approaches taken in America by Boyatzis (1998) and Guest *et al.* (2012) have

gained in popularity in the past few years, as have those advocated by Joffe (2011) in the UK. Braun & Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p.69).

When conducting thematic analysis, the task of the researcher is to identify a limited number of themes which adequately reflect the data collected, and then to determine how they are connected and interrelated to provide an overall picture or “map” of their relationship (Braun & Clarke 2013).

Following Braun & Clarke (2006, 2012), the research project used a six phase approach to conducting thematic analysis:

Phase 1: Becoming familiar with the data

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Phase 4: Reviewing themes to generate a thematic map

Phase 5: Defining and refining themes

Phase 6: Producing a report

As with any qualitative method, thematic analysis needs to be undertaken and applied carefully, consistently and creatively. The value of insights obtained through thematic analysis depends upon the interpretative skills of the researcher. Therefore, as Braun & Clarke’s website on thematic analysis emphasises: “doing a good TA [thematic analysis] is a combination of following a robust process,

applying an analytic eye to the data, and interpreting it in light of what we already know about the issue(s) being explored.” (Retrieved from <http://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/our-research/research-groups/thematic-analysis/frequently-asked-questions-8.html>)

To provide guidance on implementing good thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke (2006, p.27) provide the following 15-point checklist of criteria for ensuring the thematic analysis is sound:

1. Transcription: The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for ‘accuracy’.
2. Coding: Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
3. Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
4. All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.
5. Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
6. Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
7. Analysis: Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of -- rather than just paraphrased or described.
8. Analysis and data match each other -- the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
9. Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.
10. A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.

11. Overall: Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
12. Written report: The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
13. There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done -- i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent.
14. The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
15. The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

Appendices 3 to 5 provide examples of the analysis of the data. The initial coding of the interview is presented in Appendix 3 to show how initial codes were identified in the data. Appendix 4 presents an example of how the data and its codes were assembled into a group from which concepts were identified. Appendix 5 provides a schematic diagram showing how the concepts were assembled into groups from which overarching clusters (themes) were identified.

Validity

It is axiomatic in qualitative research that the researcher is unable to remove or adequately control for whatever biases he or she may bring to the research environment (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). These biases may place in jeopardy the value of whatever results the researcher obtains (Flick 2009). This is

especially possible where the researcher is “an insider” which Merton (1972) defines as a person with *a priori* intimate knowledge of the community that is being studied. As a result, qualitative researchers have generally adopted alternative approaches to the traditional concepts of “validity” and “reliability” espoused within a positivist paradigm (Golafshani 2003).

To reduce the potential for researcher bias to affect the objectivity of the data collection and the value of the results, the following lens (Creswell & Miller 2000) was adopted as the viewpoint for addressing validity in the main study:

- To acknowledge the existence of bias and to be alert to its potential to prevent the researcher from suspending preconceived notions about the phenomenon being studied (Glaser & Strauss 1967).
- To strive to develop rapport and trust with the participants so that they would feel comfortable to reveal their perceptions in detail (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006).
- To design the study so as to generate sufficient data from which “rich descriptions” were possible (Denzin 2002).
- To avoid sampling bias in the selection of participants by choosing a diverse range of participants based on these variables (Bloor *et al.* 2001).
- To pay close attention after establishing themes in the data analysis to look for disconfirming evidence or negative evidence (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2014).
- To maintain reflexivity by attending systematically to the process and context of knowledge construction throughout the research project, especially the effect of the researcher (Finlay & Gough 2003).

Limitations

In addition to the limitations of validity that may arise from biases that the researcher brings to the research environment and needs to be aware of, the main research study had other limitations.

First, the study was intended to be exploratory so as to investigate holistically the nature of the phenomenon of student consumerism to discover what features and characteristics were observed. Such exploratory work obviously was limited in scope and applicability because it did not screen for or control a number of variables that would allow for results to be generalised to a wider population, especially because the time and labour intensity of a qualitative methods approach do not allow for a large sample size of participants.

The study was limited to students attending postsecondary institutions in one geographical area: the metropolitan area of the Lower Mainland of BC, and so did not control for variables that may be unusual to that region.

The data collection process was limited to two methods, each of which has its own limitations. The limitations of focus groups include:

- participant responses are not independent but can be influenced by what other participants say, especially if a few dominant group members can skew the discussion;
- results are dependent on the skills of the moderator who needs to skilfully provoke and probe to ensure balanced and comprehensive data are collected.

The limitations of interviews include:

- respondents only provide self-reported information which may or may not be accurate, especially if respondents are not very introspective and so lack insight into what is being reported;
- respondents may be uncomfortable with the interviewer and prefer to give socially acceptable responses rather than truthful ones.

The use of thematic analysis as a research methodology also has limitations. The methodology relies heavily on the researcher being able to suspend preconceived notions so as to be able to view the data in an unbiased manner. There are some practical limitations to the time needed to adequately exercise an interplay between data collection and conceptualisation, especially when the discovery and interpretation of concepts and themes can overlap and become opaque. There can be doubts as to whether the data really provide insight into the phenomenon being explored, because the data may not be sufficiently associated with that phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting research using human participants raises various potential and real ethical issues. These include who should be chosen as research participants, and how their involvement should be voluntary and result in no

adverse direct consequences, such as injury to persons or their circumstances, as well as cause no collateral harm, such as loss of reputation or other emotional harm. In the case of power imbalances in interpersonal relationships, such as student-professor ones, care is also needed to ensure that there are no negative academic consequences that student participants may fear or realise.

To mitigate these harms and risks, potential participants were supplied with sufficient information for them to give informed consent to be involved in the research (See Appendix 1). The research study had been designed in ways to mitigate risks to privacy and other harms, and to conduct the research exactly as proposed.

The ethical guidelines outlined on the Open University's website were reviewed and followed: <http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/>

The research also followed the ethical standards published by the British Educational Research Association, as well as the ethical standards and protocols established nationally in Canada by the Tri-Council which outlines its work and authority at its website:

http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2/TCPS_2_FINAL_Web.pdf

There were no material differences among these various ethics procedures that would affect the design and implementation of the study.

To ensure that appropriate risks had been considered -- and that necessary steps to mitigate them were constructed -- applications were made and approved

by the local ethics committee at each of the participating institutions, as well as the Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee. The private college did not have its own ethics committee and so relied upon the approvals obtained from the other institutions.

Feedback from one institution identified two main areas which needed to be addressed further. The first of these was the potential emotional harm that could be caused by participants being asked to comment on the topic of academic dishonesty (cheating). Students may be reticent or anxious about providing candid responses to such questions which they may fear could impact them negatively. To address these concerns, the framing of the questions was altered so that participants were responding to hypothetical rather than actual situations, and the disclosure of information about the participant per se was removed from the participants in the focus groups. The second area to be addressed further was handling of the transcripts of the data collected. In addition to steps being described about how the paper transcripts would be kept in a locked filing cabinet, the institution wanted assurances as to how the electronic versions of the files would be kept secure. This was addressed by ensuring that the electronic files were removed from the researcher's computer and stored on a removable disk that was stored with the other documents in a locked cabinet.

For a copy of the research ethics approval from the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee, please see Appendix 2.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the results of the study to identify what was found from the data collected from the participants using the methodology explained in Chapter Three.

First, the chapter presents some information about the institutions and participants, and how well the research methodology was operationalised. Second, the chapter presents the various series of concepts that were found in the data, and then explains how these were grouped into five clusters of concepts that seemed to be associated with each other. Third, the chapter discusses differences in the results that were found among different types of participants. Fourth, the chapter presents a suggested explanation of the results and how this contributes to our understanding of the student-as-consumer. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing how the data have helped to answer the research questions of the study.

Change in Institutions

The data collection stage of the research proved to be protracted due to some difficulties I encountered getting permission to survey participants at two institutions. First, the student union at one institution voiced concern about the number of researchers, especially external ones, who were conducting studies on

students at the institution. My contact at the institution initially ran into difficulty obtaining the permission from the student union. Discussion was re-opened during a subsequent semester, and I was hopeful that I would be allowed to proceed. That hope did not materialize and I was forced to abandon that institution as a data collection site. In response, as a fall-back position, I contacted other career colleges in the Vancouver area and received some favourable responses. These institutions were private colleges. Drawing participants from one of them into my sample was actually beneficial, because I expected that students who were paying the full cost of their education would have a stronger disposition towards “consuming education” and thus would add another dimension to the study.

In addition, one of the professors I had located at the proposed university site was willing for me to use her classes to collect data, but then her teaching schedule was changed and she was only teaching postgraduate students which fell outside the scope of my proposed sample. By the time I became aware of that, it was too late to enlist the help of a replacement class. However, I received support from a professor at a neighbouring university, and I did not expect there would be any appreciable difference in the data collected from this institution, nor that comparisons by institution-type would be affected.

Participants and Data Collection Experience

The original sample size was targeted at 90 participants. As a result of

three students not attending the focus group sessions, and one student unable to attend a scheduled interview (despite attempts to re-schedule), the actual sample was 86 participants.

The demographic data collected regarding the participants was not extensive, and, in hindsight, this is probably an area that I would improve upon if the research were repeated. At the beginning of the interviews, I did discuss with participants some general questions about their circumstances, such as when they started their programme, what courses they were taking currently, and why they chose the institution they are attending. However, these questions were really ice-breakers to start the interview and not consistently asked, nor in any consistent format. Therefore, it is difficult to assemble afterwards this information into any reportable statistics about the participants as a whole. This is especially true of the focus group participants, where limited demographic details were offered by the participants because little personal information was solicited. Again, this is a "lesson learned" which I would pay more attention to in subsequent research of this kind.

Nonetheless, all of the participants completed a Participant Consent Form and from this I can determine, with almost certainty, that 64% were female, which is consistent with the gender proportion found in BC postsecondary institutions.

Since I kept track of the institution and programme of study of the participants, I can report the gender statistics in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Gender Distribution among Participants

Institution Type	Programme Area	Gender
Public College	Business	Male 66% Female 34%
	Arts	Male 45% Female 55%
	Sciences	Male 9% Female 91%
University	Business	Male 74% Female 26%
	Arts	Male 41% Female 59%
	Sciences	Male 11% Female 89%
Private College	Business	Male 81% Female 19%
	Arts	Male 48% Female 52%
	Sciences	Male 69% Female 31%

Overall the data collection experience went according to plan. The participants were generally very co-operative and lucid, although many of the students provided responses which were hard to transcribe later into coherent text because they commonly spoke in phrases rather than sentences, and these were often punctuated with filler speech such as "like" or "you know."

Most of the participants had no perceived difficulty discussing their situation, motives and behaviour as students. They seemed pleased that someone was interested in their views and experiences. Some of the participants seemed to struggle initially with linking the notion of "consumerism" to their situations as students and confessed that they had never really thought much about any connections or relevancy. However, it was common for participants to develop a better sense of the topic as the interviews or focus groups progressed, and many students stated later in the their data collection sessions that they recognized ways in which they did behave as consumers of education, upon reflection.

With respect to the topic of cheating -- which had been one identified for rephrasing in the interview questions by one of the research ethics reviewers -- the participants seemed candid and realistic in their comments and observations. The advice of the research ethics reviewers proved sound. Focusing on cheating among students in general, rather than asking the participants about their own personal experiences appeared to facilitate more candid responses.

The strength of a qualitative research study that uses interviews and focus groups as methods of data collection relies much on the success the interviewer has in establishing rapport with the participants and making them feel

comfortable and safe with offering candid and expansive responses. Since the interviewer was an older white male talking with younger, often female, students, it is reasonable to ask whether those participants felt me to be approachable. I have to say that my impression was that generally they did. I think much of this was because they knew I had worked at a postsecondary institution for many years in different capacities and so I was less of an “outsider” than if I had not had that background.

Some of the participants were somewhat reticent at the beginning and slow to provide substantial answers and so required some probing from me. But I did not notice any gender or age differences in general regarding this behaviour in the interview. Again, there appeared to be no difference whether the participant was an international or domestic student or what type of postsecondary institution they were attending. Indeed some of the participants were so keen to speak their mind that they wanted to keep talking long after the allotted time elapsed. Over all, in their enthusiasm, candour and loquaciousness, the research participants appeared to be suitable informants and their interviews and focus groups were rich sources of data.

Concepts and Clusters

I turn now to the results and findings that were analysed in the research data and how these help answer the research questions of the study.

From the initial coding and the subsequent analysis, a series of five clusters of concepts emerged. These are discussed individually below and are summarised in Table 6 presented later in the chapter.

a) Motivation

The participants displayed varying degrees of clarity regarding why they were currently students in their lives at the moment but they all referenced *Setting goals* as an aspect of their choice to be a student. For example, here are two comments from participants in a focus group:

Participant 1: So I see for myself education and going to school right now as an access to having what I want in my life, and having a good future.

Participant 2: So, like, I spend money to go to school so I can actually make money and actually move – have, you know, social upper mobility. Class mobility.

[both public college, arts]

The data also indicated the concept *Setting goals* should be expanded to *Setting career and life goals* because both “career” and “life” goals were sufficiently differentiated in the data since participants specifically mentioned differences between them. For example, here are the comments of a university student taking business classes:

Coming to college right now in my life will help me gain what I want out of life and give me a solid future. But I want the practice or the knowledge that I’m getting here to be something I can put into practice in my day-to-day work life.

[private college, business]

In addition, participants often mentioned that they did not have well-formed reasons for their motivation to attend postsecondary studies. Some participants seemed to have automatically entered college or university without much planning or forethought. This was identified, therefore, as a category called *Drifting*. Here are some illustrative comments from a male student taking general arts courses:

When I first enrolled [in college] ... I didn't really have any clear indication of where I wanted to focus or what goals I had in place... I just enrolled.... I wasn't prepared... didn't understand what my professors expected of me... I dropped courses.

[public college, arts]

Furthermore, related to the goals they set, the participants engaged in *Choosing an institution* from among several alternatives, commenting that they were exercising a consumer choice which they expected would pay a dividend in the form of improved career prospects:

Participant 3: Yes... when I buy something I do research before I buy it, and I suppose education is similar to that. You know, you don't just pick a school and go there. You know, you have to do your outcome research and all that...

Interviewer: Yes, why do you want to be a student at this time in your life?

Participant 3: Well, I don't want to be a student...

Interviewer: No?

Participant 3: But, to get a better career... I can't really get much of anything nowadays without postsecondary.

[university, business]

Interestingly, the participants were well aware that this consumer choice was *Responding to marketing* they experienced via the advertising and publicity that the institution itself promoted:

I think, honestly, I think school's a business, like any other thing... I believe that they want us to do good only because we're a commercial for their school.... So in that regard, I feel the school wants us to get an education, do good, get out there, get a job; hey, be somebody so that you can say, yes, you're from [college name], so we can get the next generation and more and more and keep it going...And I'm not saying they're bad or anything like that, but I'm just thinking – I'm just aware that they're a business.

[private college, sciences]

Most of the participants gave information about how important their education was to their parents or other family members, especially where those were partners in paying for the education, which led the participants to see themselves as *Satisfying family* as part of their role as a student:

Interviewer: Does that create tension?

Participant: A little bit. A little bit. I see how – I want to please my parents for sure, and at the same time I've been kind of going with my own interests, and sometimes that works both – I get like what I'm out to have with my own personal interests or goals, and at the same time my parents are happy because they think it's worthwhile and a good opportunity or a good venture to, you know, get into, yes....

[university, business]

When compared together, these concepts all appeared to link to a broader category that was identified as *MOTIVATION* because the concepts all involved types of reasons why the participants were students and what purpose that was fulfilling in general in their lives. This cluster of concepts is depicted in Figure 2 below:



Figure 2: The Motivation Cluster of Concepts

b) Transaction

A second set of concepts emerged from the data where the participants described how central the transacting of business tasks was in their view of their relationship with the postsecondary institution. Selecting a college was only one aspect of a broader form of *Shopping* behaviour that the participants engaged in when selecting courses:

But, yes, students are consumers of education and we do shop... It depends. You know, you find a professor you like and you take other classes from them.

[university, arts]

Data indicated that the shopping for courses by some participants was often quite deliberate and strategic in nature:

And often... I'll sign up for classes... and I'll go to all of them, and get the syllabus, and decide whether I want to take that class and the ones that have an exam worth that much. I just, I can't afford to take that class [with many exams] because I won't do well... I get home at the end of the week and I've got all my classes I have with outlines and I know how much – how many tests there are – usually tests are a big thing for me... And then, I kind of ditch the classes that I don't feel and work it down to the three or four that I feel I can do well in.

[public college, business]

And the participants were aware of and used the information available at the internet site *RateMyProfessors.Com* which provides reviews of professors solicited from students who have taken courses previously from these professors.

So, no, I didn't complain. If I'd stayed in the class and filled out the survey at the end, I probably would have said that I was

disappointed with how it had gone. But, all I can do is write my rating on the Internet and then hope that other people will – if they have the same needs as me, will read that and maybe not...

[public college, arts]

Where standards of professionalism are breached, the participants indicated they were *Willing to complain* in order to seek redress:

[It was] The very first class, and 10 or 15 minutes go by with all the students waiting for the professor to show up and he hasn't shown up yet, and I was the only one who goes to, you know, the departmental office, and I said, "Our professor isn't here, we've been waiting, he should've been here by now," kind of thing, and I was getting agitated, and in that circumstance, I wanted to complain, you know, myself and other students are paying good money for this. This is a professor who is supposed to be like intentional and on time as he wants his students to be on time, so I was just getting agitated.

[public college, business]

Moreover, participants' responses often provided data that indicated the desire to *Negotiate* with academic staff was often a prelude or a substitute to actually making any complaint. Indeed, participants often said they were extremely reluctant to complain about grades or other aspects of a course because of the perceived imbalance in power between the student and the academic staff:

Interviewer: But you weren't willing to make a complaint about that?

Participant 4: No... I would go if it wasn't just me. If it was a couple of students.

Interviewer: If there were others?

Participant 4: [Pause] Yes, but no one wanted to do that. Everyone's [saying] like, it's not worth it. It's stacked against you.

[university, sciences]

This cluster of concepts was termed *TRANSACTION* because these concepts all involved the participant viewing the relationship with the institution as one where tasks were performed to transact business within an expected set of standards. This cluster is depicted in Figure 3:

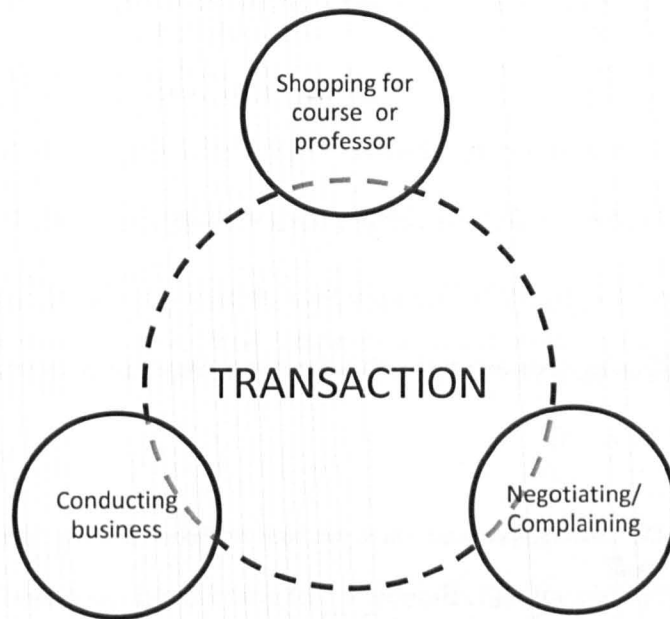


Figure 3: The Transaction Cluster of Concepts

c) Expectation

A third set of clusters was identified within the data provided by the interview and focus group transcripts. The participants explained what they expected from the institutions they were attending.

The participants explained how they were *Expecting service* -- a certain standard of professionalism -- from their professors almost in the form of a contractual relationship, where they expected to receive a certain level of service:

I don't need you to read off the PowerPoint. I don't know. I don't miss classes so, I feel like if I go to all my classes, and I sit through the three hour lectures, and I pay attention, and I take notes, I want to feel like I've learned something, you know, and I don't want to read the textbook and have it all be the exact same information. If you're going to make me buy a textbook, I expect it to be

different information... The thing I – that really drives me the most is, you know grinds me, is when I go to class and it's the same as the book...

[private college, sciences]

One type of expectation among students was in receiving consistent and reliable service, particularly in the day-to-day transactions that occurred on campus. One common concern regarding value-for-money was the impact of the cost of purchasing textbooks. For example, this female university student complained:

Interviewer: Does that happen a lot where you have textbooks that don't get used?

Participant 5: Yes, that don't get used, [I] don't even open them or I review them and try to be prepared for class. You come [to class], having bought the textbooks, and the professor comes and says: "You know, actually you don't really need your textbook" ... I'm a student trying to save every penny I can. You know a wasted textbook is a huge deal [to me].

[university, sciences]

In addition, participants talked about how much they wanted to be *Treated fairly* and respectfully as students. For example, here is one international student taking general arts at a college discussing her experience with in a psychology class:

I like psychology professor [sic] but I don't like some of the students in the class who were mean. Because my English not good enough. I expected more kind response. I try to say what I mean but I get really nervous. They [other students] treated me as dumb. I am having trouble with course. I talk to prof – she said I think you can do it. Very encouraging. Prof helped me a lot... The best ever. Her response was admirable. I got an A in the class. I changed my mind.

[private college, arts]

Participants also described how they had expectations that they would be *Acquiring knowledge* from their courses and that their experience in class would

inspire them. While some students were content to coast without being challenged, others, such as this female general arts student at a college, made it clear she was not happy with one academic staff's approach to merely reading out PowerPoint slides -- a common complaint among participants:

And so, when I pay for a class and I come to class, and the teacher is standing there reading off the PowerPoint and then post them online, that just makes me so mad. I know how to read. I could read the PowerPoints on my own, you know.

[public college, sciences]

These concepts relating to the overall cluster called *EXPECTATION* are shown in Figure 4:

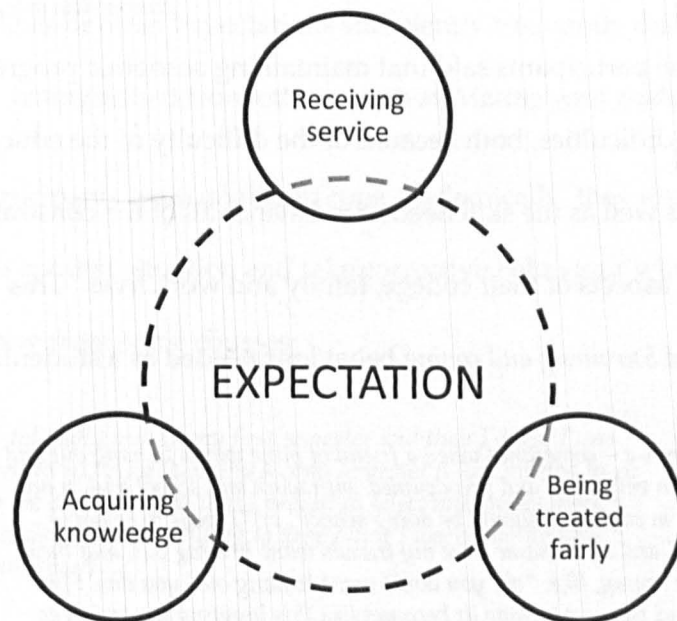


Figure 4: The Expectation Cluster of Concepts

d) Progression

This cluster is formed from a set of concepts related to elements of recognizing or responding to the student's academic progress.

One aspect of this relates to how important *Making good grades* and test marks were for supporting students' sense of progress throughout their studies:

I think I've been successful in my classes, but I'm not always happy with my grades. Just sometimes, when I'll be really comfortable and have a good understanding, or I think I have a good understanding of an idea or a topic that's discussed in class,

and sometimes I find my understanding of that idea isn't always portrayed in the sense that I wanted it to be portrayed, or my professor doesn't understand what I'm really trying to get at in those papers, and that's where I get disappointed in my marks.

[university, arts]

But the participants said that maintaining academic progress was also fraught with difficulties, both because of the difficulty of the educational material sometimes, as well as the skill needed to balance all of the constraints on their time from all aspects of their college, family and work lives. This was coded as the concept of *Surviving and coping* behaviour needed as a student:

Or there's a – sometimes when a friend of mine wants to hang out and I've been very busy and preoccupied with work and school and in my mind I'm saying "I should be doing school" or "I want to be doing school," and at the same time my friends want to hang out, and then they're saying, like, "oh, you don't want to hang out, you don't like me," and then, you know, it becomes like this juggling act trying to please my friends because they want to hang out and they're thinking that I don't like them anymore, and then focusing on my school, which is very preoccupied as well.

[public college, business]

Participants often distinguished between situations where their experience differed on a continuum from simply handling the pressures of muddling along

with their studies to struggling with those pressures and facing self-doubt or other issues that caused them to panic about being able to complete their programme:

I don't like to drop, you know. I really don't like to give up, but I did drop it because I was having some really -- a lot of difficulty with a major assignment and it was coming up to the mid-term... and I was sending him [the academic staff] emails and trying to -- he was never in his office, and he never answered my emails, and he would never be available after class, and I just knew that I wasn't going to be able to [continue]. If I couldn't ask questions, then I wasn't going to be successful. So, I dropped it.

[public college, arts]

In addition, a concept of *Completing assignments* was noticeable in the data collected because participants spoke of the pressures they faced being able to meet assignment deadlines or other expectations sufficiently frequently that this concept could be distinguished from others, such as *Making good grades*.

Where participants were unable to cope academically, they explained how they needed to accept that situation and take corrective behaviour which may involve *Withdrawing* from some courses:

And then, I did really well in my first semester and then I guess I was really pumped to go. And then, my second semester it just started to go downhill for me and I realised that I needed to select my classes more carefully and also, I wasn't willing to drop out if I wasn't doing well, which was not smart.

[private college, sciences]

Where withdrawal is not an option, another alternative that was considered by some of the participants was *Cheating*

behaviour, such as accessing answers from mobile phones or copying from other students:

You know, people fear the consequences and... the last thing you want is to – it's so – it's like getting caught shoplifting... It's more like an act of desperation than anything... If there's a really abstract concept and I'm studying it, and studying it, and studying it, and it's just not coming to me... I know that I have to know it, then, I feel like that I have no other option.... It's frustrating to not be in control...

[public college, business]

These concepts were clustered together under the category *PROGRESSION* because they were all related as elements of acknowledging or responding to the student's academic progress. They are depicted in Figure 5:

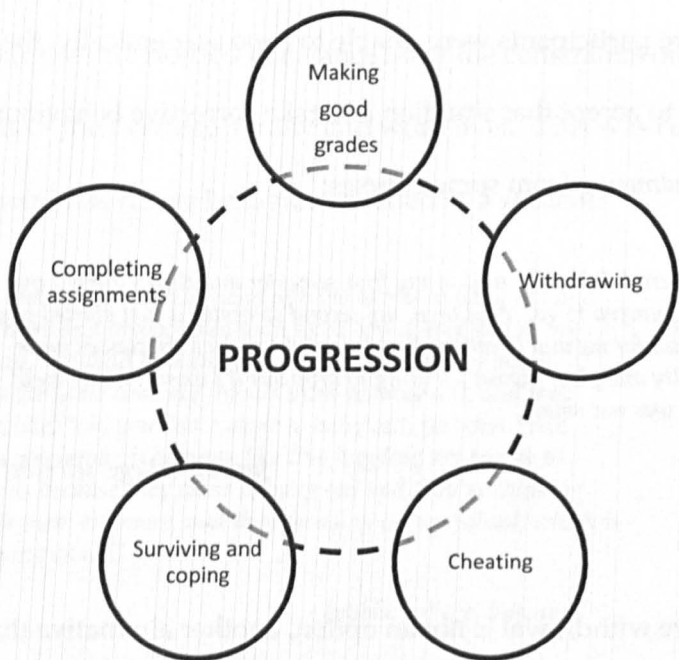


Figure 5: The Progression Cluster of Concepts

e) Transformation

A final set of concepts was found in the data analysis that related to the impact that the participant's education had on transforming the participant's sense of themselves and their learning environment. The term "transformation" is used here in a similar vein to the product of transformative learning (Mezirow 1981) which Taylor (1998) defines as:

Transformative learning attempts to explain how our expectations, framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions, directly influence the meaning we derive from our experiences. (p.6)

The participants explained how by *Growing personally* they benefitted from their studies:

Yes, I definitely see myself being involved in that way, and also there's sometimes when, like I said, a situation or a scenario will be in front of me and I'll notice it and think like, "oh, that's really cool", and then I want to be a part of that, and I'll want to engage with it like on a more, I guess, personal level, rather than just looking at it from the outside.

[public college, arts]

The participants explained how greater engagement in their studies helped with *Feeling involved* in their education and being co-creators with their professors:

In the sense, like, even though my professors may have a lot of knowledge and a lot of understanding on some topics, at the same time myself or other students have a lot of knowledge and experience to offer my professor, as well ...

[university, sciences]

Learning was created, the participants explained, in an environment where *Connecting with peers* was as important a part of the education as whatever the professor provided:

I was surprised, really surprised, by how much I learned from other students in my classes. Such a huge variety of different life experiences and viewpoints. I really had my mind opened... and challenged.

[public college, arts]

Finally, the participants explained how they were involved in *Changing goals* as their studies progressed. The direction they were headed might change as a result of new things they learned or difficulties that required a reassessment of goals:

Participant 6: No. When I first came I had a different vision, you know... of what my future would be like and you know, that's normal, I think, when you come from...

Interviewer: How was it different?

Participant 6: Oh, when I came from high school I was going to be a criminologist and then be a profiler, and just, you know, crazy ideas... And, your interests change as well, I think... Yes. Well, I mean, to get where I want to go there are courses that I'm taking that I don't want to take, but I have to.

[public college, business]

Since all of these concepts were related to the impact that the participants' learning had on transforming the participants' sense of themselves and their learning environment, this fourth group of concepts was clustered under the broad heading of *TRANSFORMATION*. This cluster is depicted in Figure 6:

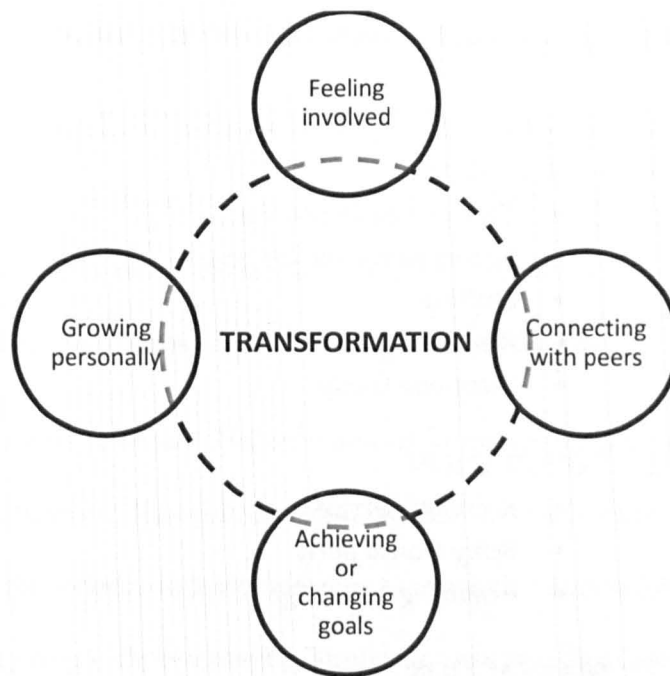


Figure 6: The Transformation Cluster of Concepts

A summary of the concepts listed under each of the five clusters that were found in the study is listed in Table 6 below:

Table 6: Summary of Clusters of Concepts Found in the Study

1. MOTIVATION

- *Choosing an institution*
- *Setting career and life goals*
- *Drifting*
- *Responding to marketing*
- *Satisfying family*

2. EXPECTATION

- *Receiving service*
- *Being treated fairly*
- *Acquiring knowledge*

3. TRANSACTION

- *Conducting business*
- *Shopping for course/professor*
- *Negotiating or complaining*

4. PROGRESSION

- *Surviving and coping*
- *Completing assignments*
- *Making grades*
- *Cheating*
- *Withdrawing*

5. TRANSFORMATION

- *Growing personally*
- *Being engaged*
- *Connecting with peers*
- *Achieving or changing goals*

Differences among Participant Types

The data produced in the study suggest that there are few differences in the responses of students according to the type of programme they are enrolled in. Indeed, there is as much variation among the students within each programme as there is across different programmes of study.

An example of broad similarity among all programme types is with the “shopping” behaviour. It is quite remarkable that the vast majority of participants have all used the website *RateMyProfessors* to research information about various professors they might choose among, similar to people using *Consumer Reports* to compare products available in stores. This was true even when the students -- such as ones in the nursing programme -- had no choice because the academic staff were automatically assigned to the courses. Such students simply went to the website out of curiosity about who they would have as their professor:

Well, I wanted to see what others had said about the guy. No, I didn't have any choice of taking another because there was no choice. You just got whoever was teaching that course. But, yeah, I was just interested... so I knew what to expect I guess.

[public college, sciences]

However, some differences among programme types were observed in the data. For example, participants who were enrolled in business courses were, not unexpectedly, more extrinsically focused on how their education would lead them to successfully achieve career goals, rather than on any intrinsic motivation of acquiring knowledge. Examples of more intrinsic motivation were found more commonly among participants enrolled in general arts courses. The students enrolled in nursing courses were even more career-focused than those enrolled in

business courses, and nursing students often spoke of the relevance or not of what they were learning with respect to the value or not that this would have in their chosen career. Many of the nursing participants felt their studies were too theoretical and not sufficiently vocationally focused and they voiced concerns about boredom in lectures on content that was irrelevant to their future nursing practice.

Another area of difference among programme types was in the willingness of students to make complaints. (This was one of the traits of student consumerism discussed previously in Chapter Two). Again, students enrolled in business courses generally seemed more transactionally-minded with respect to expectations of the contract between students and academic staff. They were more likely to say they would complain if aspects of this contract were broken. But this seemed to be more of an attitude rather than a behaviour, because -- when pressed -- the students were less clear about how they would actually make a complaint or who they would even complain to and may prefer to be anonymous:

I don't really know who I would complain to. I would complain to an academic advisor? I wish they had some letterbox to put in a note rather than have to personally complain.

[private college, business]

However, international students taking business courses were noticeably less willing to complain, perhaps because they felt somewhat more of an outsider to the institution. Those of East Asian origin, in particular, said they came from cultures where their professors were more revered and their actions were less likely to be questioned.

Among the nursing students, the willingness to complain was even more absent. This was an unexpected finding at first. It was not expected that such vocationally-minded students would be so demure. However, the data showed that there was a strong culture of fear among the nursing students that placed the academic staff in an almost insurmountable position of power. The nursing students that complained, especially ones who made formal complaints, were described as effectively putting their future careers in jeopardy. This is because students would rely heavily on references from the academic staff when students graduated and were seeking employment. Also, the academic staff were highly present in the clinical settings of hospitals or medical agencies where the students did their placements, and academic staff held considerable power over whether the student was evaluated as successfully demonstrating good nursing practice. In this milieu, participants said they would only complain as a last resort.

Suggested Explanation

Given the exploratory nature of this research study and the limitations of its methodology, it is not appropriate for the study to develop an elaborate theory to explain the results obtained. Such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this study and would require a larger data set be gathered.

However, it is perhaps useful to sketch out some provisional observations of what has emerged from the study that may indicate some tentative theoretical explanation of the findings, and which can help identify how the different themes identified are related or connected.

In Figure 7, the five themes are assembled into a schematic diagram designed to depict what the study suggests may be the inter-relationships among these themes. The results of the study suggest that we can understand the nature of student consumerism as a construct where the student views her/his relationship with the postsecondary institution through a series of lenses represented by the themes. The arrows in the diagram are not intended to represent causality but to suggest some chronology since some of the themes are experienced earlier than others in a student's programme of study.

Students first interact as consumers of education when they consider their motivation for becoming a student. They embark on a kind of cost-benefit analysis of what they can get out of the enterprise. They consider their goals and those of other stakeholders, such as parents or the institution itself.

As they enrol in the institution and become students, the consumer relationship becomes more complicated. Students embark on various transactions with the institution, such as conducting day-to-day business in the library or cafeteria, as well as shopping for courses or professors (where this is possible), interacting with other students whether as peers or making friends, and complaining or negotiating aspects of the consumer experience that they have difficulty with.

Students have developed various expectations for how they will be treated as consumers by the institution and its employees, and what they expect as services in return for what they have paid for. They expect those services to be

delivered as advertised in ways that treat them fairly as customers. However -- in important ways that reveal the complicated nature of their consumer experience as students -- they also expect to receive a value-added experience that moves beyond basic consumer transactions, to include aspects such as being inspired and learning something new that is relevant and valuable.

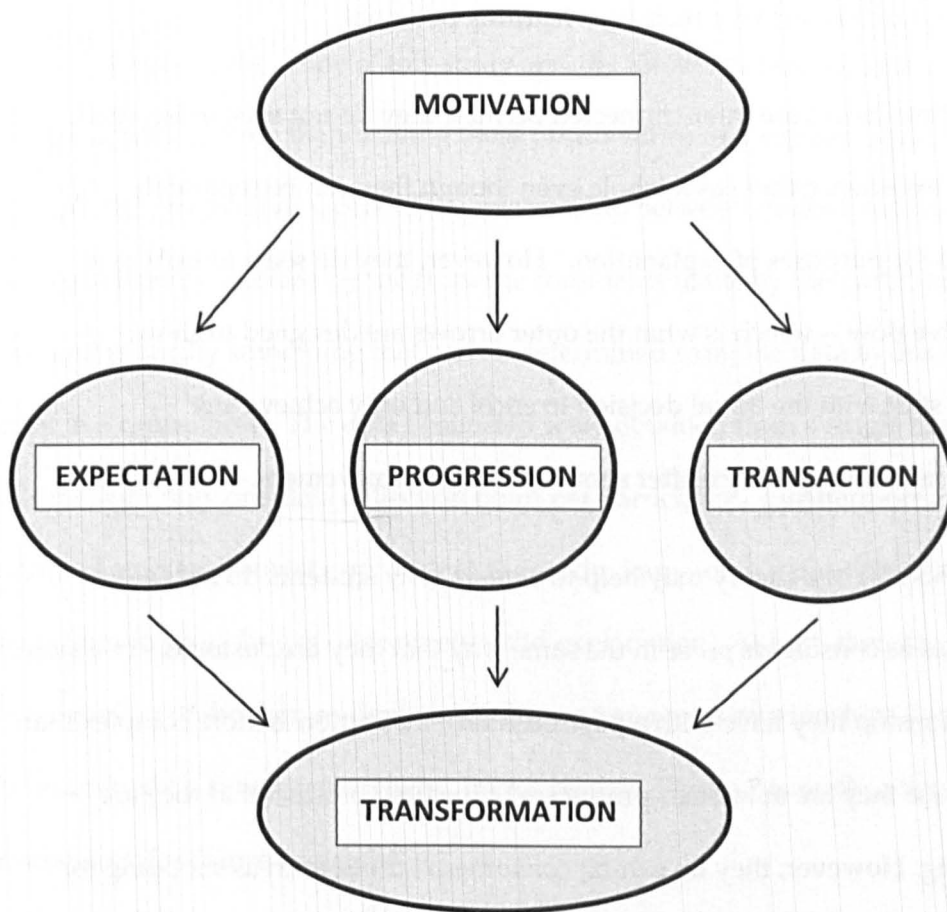


Figure 7: Suggested Explanation: A Heuristic Framework for Future Research

This leads to the higher order aspect of the consumer experience which the student seeks. While not necessarily achieved by all students -- and possibly a

reason why some students leave institutions prematurely -- students expect to be transformed by their experience. They expect to grow and develop as students and to become more educated people than when they first embarked on their studies. But they appreciate that this is something that *they* need to achieve through their own effort and learning. While the institution may create the conditions for learning to occur, the students appreciate it is they alone as students who must achieve their own learning potential.

These lenses are inter-connected because they do not exist in isolation. Students experience them as a whole even though they can be separately identified for purposes of explanation. However, they do seem to exist in a progressive flow -- which is what the outer arrows are designed to show. Students start with the initial decision to enrol and only achieve any transformational experience after some effort and achievement.

This sort of a theory may help to explain why students do not see themselves as consumers *per se* in the same way that they are customers of a store. The relationship they have with a postsecondary institution is more complex than that because they are at least co-producers of the final product that they are purchasing. However, they do exhibit consumerist traits, such as shopping for courses, and they do have service expectations and are conscious of value-for-money. And, while students today are very focused on the extrinsic value of their education to achieve future career goals, this is not a narrow vocationalism. Most importantly, this is because the nature of their relationship with a postsecondary institution develops over time -- it is progressive. And students seek such a

progression in their desire to be transformed by their education. They are not simply purchasing a product, they are buying an opportunity.

The experience of pursuing an education is not simply a transaction but is also desired as a transformation. The literature on student consumerism thus far does not appear to have sufficiently emphasized this progressive aspect of the relationship between student and institution.

However, the scope of this study and the limited data sample do not permit anything more than making these observations as a suggested explanation. Indeed, the progressive aspect of the relationship between student and institution has been heavily inferred by me from the comments made by the participants to me, and is hardly something that can be determined from the data in this study to exist in a causal flow. The data I collected were obtained from a single snapshot in time with only one data collection point per participant. Furthermore, since I adopted an interpretivist approach to the study, I am not in a position to advance any claim to providing an objectively valid explanation. At best, therefore, the arrangement of the themes depicted in Figure 6 suggests relationships that should be examined by future researchers. In this respect, Figure 7 is really a heuristic framework for future research.

Answers to Research Questions

The purpose of the research was to conduct an empirical study of students' attitudes towards the phenomenon of student consumerism using interviews and

focus groups to generate qualitative data that could provide a picture of how, why and to what extent students perceive themselves to be consumers of higher education in BC . The research drew from samples of students at institutions of different sizes and purposes, and from students in different programmes, to explore what differences existed among those variables. Consistent with its exploratory approach rooted in an interpretative perspective, the study sought to generate data that could provide an understanding of how and in what ways students may perceive themselves to be consumers and how those perceptions may vary among different students.

From the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn regarding the original research questions:

Question 1: To what extent do students in postsecondary institutions in BC perceive themselves to be consumers of higher education?

The participants in the study did not generally view themselves as consumers *per se* in their role as students:

I don't really think of consumers and being education, but I guess to consume is just to take something in, so education would be one of those things. I just didn't really think of it that way.

[public college, business]

However, as some of the interviews and focus groups progressed, the participants clearly became more open to acknowledging ways in which they behaved on campus that could be described as consumer behaviour:

Participant 8: When people say consumer, I think most people think of a consumer as a shopper.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Don't you shop for education too?

Participant 8: I suppose I do, yes. I just didn't really think of it like that until now.

[university, sciences]

Part of the reason the participants suggested for why they do not readily view themselves as student consumers was because they are immersed generally in such a pervasive consumer society:

It's gotten to a point where I think that it's just... like, that's what we are, homo economicus, and ... it's in every facet of our life. It's just taken for granted... Yes, and consumerism, because that's all it is. I mean, we're living in one big commercial, and I feel bad because I'm going to want more like, nice Nike shoes. Everybody sees them; they're like, hey, nice shoes, and sweeter. So I am a walking commercial and it's very sad. It's a scary thing.

[public college, arts]

The participants had similar difficulty describing in more than general terms what they perceived the role of a student to be:

You know, learning from a professor; a learner, I guess... Just a person in the process of learning. We're always continuously learning, so a person who learns through someone else, pretty much, like someone who has a guide or someone to guide them through whatever they're studying. I would say that's a student.

[public college, sciences]

And where the participants linked the labels of consumer and student directly, the associations were only loosely connected and only vaguely coherent:

I think that's – I think, first of all, of course you're a consumer. A student is a consumer. You're consuming all these ideas, you're consuming – you're just – you're consuming how – what is normal, or how you should be out there, and not only – you're just – you're – not only that. I feel that, as a student, as a consumer, I believe they're consumers but sometimes they're shopping at really bad stores for their ideas.

[university, business]

Therefore, the postsecondary students who participated in the study did report that there were ways in which they behaved as consumers on campus, but this was not how they primarily viewed themselves and their relationship with their institution.

Question 2: In what ways do students in postsecondary institutions in BC perceive themselves to behave as student consumers?

While the participants only vaguely acknowledged they behaved as student consumers *per se*, they did offer clear examples of types of consumer behaviour and consumer attitudes. This was especially evident when participants used the language associated with the concepts of *Shopping* and *Complaining* as these might be used in a store:

You shop around for the right professor and, you know, you want to complain to the Manager if it's not what you thought it would be, and if your product isn't what it said it would be...

[public college, business]

Some participants used the same language when talking about *Cheating* behaviour and how students who felt less in control or unjustly treated might seek redress:

You know, they feel like they have – they've lost control or that they can't control the situation. It's frustrating to not be in control. And so, I guess shoplifting is a way of getting back at the man.... As silly as that sounds.

[university, arts]

Participants generally saw themselves as consumers whenever money was involved as an exchange for education, and where they needed to be concerned with the monetary cost to them or their family and the desire to receive value-for-money:

Well, I have to, too because it's about – it's a money thing... Also, which is part of shopping and I can't afford to be pulling out of classes after I'm not going to get my money back. Just like I can't afford to be buying textbooks I don't need, although I do. I've done that in the past.

[public college, sciences]

And the participants viewed aspects of the TRANSFORMATION category, such as *Feeling involved* and *Growing personally*, through the lens of obtaining value-for-money, so that even the experience in the classroom was a monetary exchange for services received:

Interviewer:

How do you know when you're getting value-for-money?

Participant 9:

I guess when I'm just taking classes where I don't feel like I've gotten the bang for my buck necessarily, if I don't – if I'm not satisfied with the teacher, the professor...

[private college, sciences]

Nonetheless some participants acknowledged that there are limits on the consumer exchange occurring within the classroom, and that even with respect to the very tangible concept of *Making good grades* the desired outcome was more comprehensive satisfaction than was measured by the grade itself:

Interviewer: And how important are good grades to you?

Participant 10: It's hard to say. I mean, I definitely like good grades... but at the same time I'm not always concerned with getting a good grade. I'm more concerned in the grasping the knowledge and the understanding that my professors want to convey, and I'm – there's been some classes where I feel very successful and accomplished in my understanding and what I've gotten out of that class despite getting like a B or a C+, right?

[university, sciences]

Participants also drew parallels between consumerism on campus and consumerism in society in general that indicted the latter was exerting a steering effect to the extent that changes in society were provoking more student consumerism rather than students actually seeking more of it themselves -- the notion that broader developments were *pushing* consumerism on students rather than students *pulling* those changes forward. Here are two examples of that, one relating to the concept of *Choosing an institution* and the other to the concept of *Responding to marketing*:

Participant 11: So, the whole shopping experience has really changed and it's the same goes for education. You don't have to ask peers anymore if they like a professor. You can just read about it online from a hundred people instead of two.

Participant 12: What's right in my mind is that with [college name], like the advertisements and the posters ... that you see, I see how [college name] is positioning itself ...

saying like "if you want to have a great life, if you want whatever you want in your life, you can have it by going to school, getting good education"... And, yes, I just see how [college name] has I guess shaped itself to be as like a product giving itself away, giving away education, right?

[public college, arts]

Question 3: Do perceptions and behaviours of consumerism vary among students in different programmes and different types of postsecondary institutions in BC?

The analysis of my data identified some variation among students attending different institutions and attending different programmes. However, generally this variation was not highly pronounced.

Students enrolled in more vocationally-focused programmes, such as business or nursing, expressed their goals more clearly and in more detail than participants enrolled in general arts and sciences programmes:

I've been kind of going with my own interests and sometimes that works both – I get like what I'm out to have with my own personal interests or goals, and at the same time my parents are happy because they think it's worthwhile and a good opportunity or a good venture to, you know, get into, yes....

[public college, arts]

Notably, students in programmes, such as health sciences, where they have little or no choice in their professors still almost universally visited the *RateMyProfessors* evaluation website simply out of curiosity to see what information was available:

Well in nursing we don't get any choice in our instructor. The timetable was just given to us. But I still went on the internet to check on who I was

getting. I guess I was just wondering what others had said about her... just for interest sake.

[public college, sciences]

Even within different types of vocationally-based programmes some variations in responses were evident. For example, business students were more likely to express a willingness to complain if they felt they had been graded incorrectly or been treated unfairly:

Sure I would complain to the Dean if my assignment marks were unfair. I mean not if it was just a few marks here or there but if he marked answers wrong that were right or gave me a lousy grade when I figured I done okay and wouldn't listen to me then, sure, I'd go over his head.

[public college, business]

In contrast, health sciences students expressed a strong degree of futility in voicing complaints because they felt "the system" was stacked against them and professors held considerable power in the students' future employment potential in the field:

I did consider making a complaint when my practicum [placement] supervisor failed me on some procedures because I felt she was being too harsh on me. But I dismissed the idea quick when I realized that she could bad-mouth me with the hospital and that would get around and could hurt me big time later.

[public college, sciences]

The sample of participants included a number of international students who provided responses that generally showed they were less inclined to complain due to their more precarious status and cultural differences:

Where I come from student not complain about teacher... teacher is expert... teacher is almighty... student is just so low that nobody respect their opinion. Canada [is] different.

[private college, arts]

Among different types of institution, there was some variation in MOTIVATION such as *Choosing an institution, Setting career and life goals and Satisfying family* among students attending arts and sciences programmes at colleges versus university. College students often expressed some confusion about why they were a student and what purpose it was serving in their lives:

When I first started, in my first semester, I think I was pretty clear why I was in college. Like, it was a given... everyone expects you to go to postsecondary. But now I'm not so sure... No, it's not so clear at all. I keep taking different classes... It's like trying on clothes at the store to see what fits. Meanwhile, hey I'm racking up a lot of debt. Man, that really freaks me out sometimes.

[public college, arts]

While there were exceptions, the university students generally appeared to be more clearly motivated in their studies and the particular route they had chosen. This often reflected the competitive nature of admission into a more selective institution, where higher academic performance in secondary school is required to qualify for entry:

I busted my butt in high school to get decent grades. I really wanted to get into [institution name] business school...because of its reputation... now I'm here and loving it, I see the sacrifice was worth it.

[university, business]

However, in general, there was very little variation among responses from participants attending the different types of institution included in the study. The nature of student consumerism found in the

study did not seem to matter whether a participant was attending a university or college, public or private. This addresses somewhat the query asked by Naidoo & Jamieson (2005) as to whether “the outcomes of forces for commodification may differ substantially across different types of universities and subject areas” (p. 279). It suggests that the consumerist framework emerging from the findings is widespread among postsecondary students in general and is not highly sensitive to institutional type, at least in BC.

The most likely explanation for this lies in the increasingly homogeneous nature of postsecondary types in BC today (Cowin, 2007). Since colleges and institutes have become degree-granting institutions, the students they attract pursue similar types and lengths of programmes to those students attending universities. While the universities are more competitive in their admissions, and select students with higher secondary school grades than the colleges or institutes do, many students who could attend university choose to enter college first and later transfer to university to complete their degree because college tuition fees are considerably less expensive and the college campus is closer to the student’s home with reduced accommodation and transportation costs.

Overall, the findings of the study have provided evidence that the participants do perceive themselves to act as student consumers sometimes in their relationship with postsecondary institutions. They described behaving like consumers in situations where they were, for example, engaged in activities that

were coded under the concepts of *Setting career and life goals*, *Shopping*, *Choosing an institution*, *Complaining*, *Cheating*, and *Responding to marketing*. Nonetheless, the participants did not perceive themselves to be acting as consumers *per se*, even though the participants were open to acknowledging they saw themselves as student consumers the more they thought about it. Furthermore, the participants explained specifically situations and behaviours where they strived for non-consumer outcomes such as the activities coded under the categories of *Satisfying family*, *Growing personally*, *Feeling involved* and *Connecting with peers*.

Therefore, the notion of student-as-consumer appears to have some currency with the participants of postsecondary institutions but it is not a sufficient explanation of the more multi-faceted role that students seek and engage in when attending postsecondary institutions. The students saw themselves primarily as *learners*, not consumers, although traits of consumerism were evident in their behaviour and expectations, such as their near universal interest in the evaluations available at the *RateMyProfessors* website.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Introduction

This thesis has examined the nature of students being viewed as *consumers* in the marketplace of higher education -- in much the same way as they are seen as consumers in other markets. The primary intention was to explore how students view themselves as consumers and to understand this relationship from the student perspective using the data collected in the study. The scope of the research was limited to a sample of students attending three postsecondary institutions in BC. This concluding chapter will examine the implications of the study.

The chapter is organized into three sections. The first discusses the contribution of the research study to the field in general and the topic of student consumerism in particular. The second section describes some additional research that the study's findings suggest would be valuable to undertake in future. The final section explains the implications of the research study to educational practice and my own personal practice.

Contribution of the Research

Through the use of focus groups and personal interviews, the study sought to explore what are common beliefs, experiences, behaviours and

expectations among different groups of current students attending higher education institutions in BC regarding student consumerism. How important are the results that were found?

First, as the literature review showed, there has been very little attention paid in Canada in general and BC in particular to the phenomenon of the student-as-consumer. In contrast to both the USA and the UK, this topic has not been addressed in the Canadian context. Therefore, this study breaks new ground in examining the topic in Canada. This is a significant contribution to the Canadian literature and to our understanding of the experience of postsecondary education by students in BC. This significance is enhanced by the extent to which aspects of the commodification of higher education and institutional responses to consumer-like aspirations are evident in Canada, as outlined in Chapter One. The findings of this research will be useful to those interested in how the strategic planning of postsecondary institutions in BC and Canada -- especially related to areas such as marketing, recruitment, student services and classroom management -- can take into account the nature of student consumerism that is documented here.

Second, much of the attention paid previously to the topic of student consumerism has assumed that the phenomenon is prevalent and well-understood (e.g. Coaldrake 2002a, Harris, N. 2007 and Assadourian 2010). This study adds to previous work (e.g. Brennan & Bennington 200, Kotze & du Plessis 2003, George 2007, and Nordensvard, 2011) which has called into question a simplistic view of student consumerism by finding that some postsecondary students primarily view themselves as learners, not as consumers *per se*, even

though they acknowledge and demonstrate some consumer behaviours and expectations. In addition, the findings of this study go further. They show that postsecondary students have a strong reciprocal relationship with their institutions. Students expect that they will need to expend effort and earn intellectual and skill development in a transformational engagement with their studies, but they also expect the institution to deliver good service both in and out of the classroom as part of the experience their tuition fees have paid for. This reciprocal relationship has largely gone unacknowledged or unrecognised in the literature on the topic to date. Therefore, this study is significant in stressing that aspect.

Third, the exploratory nature of this qualitative study has revealed nuances which previous research on the topic has either ignored or missed. For example, there is the almost universal interest in reviewing previous performance evaluations on prospective professors available on-line using the website *RateMyProfessors*. Even in programmes where students had no choice over which professor they would be assigned, students still visited the site to gain vicarious knowledge about whom they would have as a teacher.

Fourth, the thematic analysis of this study has provided a suggested theoretical explanation of how the postsecondary students who participated in this study viewed themselves in part as student consumers. While this tentative explanation is rudimentary in scope and singular in effect, it still not only adds to the literature on the topic of student consumerism but also provides a suggested

theoretical dimension in a field which has lacked theory and focused more on polemical debates and academic commentary. The suggested explanation also serves as a heuristic framework for possible future research.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has helped to advance the body of literature on the topic of student consumerism in postsecondary education. It has also revealed areas where further investigation is needed. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is a dearth of empirical studies of the phenomenon of student consumerism. This study sought to add to the relatively small amount of previous research by conducting an exploratory qualitative investigation in a specific geographical region.

Since the study found that the participants did not perceive themselves to be acting as consumers *per se*, even though the participants were open to acknowledging they saw themselves as student consumers in some aspects, future qualitative work should be conducted to explore this in further detail. How clearly do students understand a consumer ethos? This study assumed that students were all using a similar frame of reference for the concept. Since the study found that students acknowledged more consumer behaviour the more they talked about it, the notion of student-as-consumer may be a latent concept for students which future qualitative research could examine further.

The thematic analysis of this study offered an explanatory theory of how the postsecondary students who participated in this study viewed themselves in part as student consumers. This theoretical explanation requires further exploration. Can future research confirm how robust the concepts are in this theory? Would future research find additional themes to add to those in this theoretical explanation or find that some concepts should be collapsed as redundant? Are the concepts presented here ones which other researchers can confirm are present in populations of other students -- particularly in the UK and USA where the literature suggests that the phenomenon of student consumerism may be more pronounced than in Canada? In addition, further research could explore some of these themes in more detail, especially the ones which were shown to be most prevalent, for example, activities captured within the concepts of *Shopping*, *Choosing*, and *Responding to marketing*, as well as non-consumer activities coded under the categories of *Satisfying family*, *Growing personally*, *Feeling involved* and *Connecting with peers*, for example. Indeed, the suggested explanation depicted in Figure 6 in Chapter Four offers a heuristic framework of relationships among the themes found in this study which represent opportunities for further study.

Future research that provides further comparison studies would also be useful. Although this study did not find considerable variation among students attending different types of institution or different types of programme, variations of other kinds may exist. Do attitudes towards consumerism vary among students at different stages of their educational career, such as first year students compared

to post-graduate students? To what extent do teaching and other staff in postsecondary institutions see students exhibiting the behaviours and attitudes towards consumerism that the students have reported in this study? How self-aware are the students and how accurately have they portrayed their engagement with a consumer ethos on campus?

Implications of the Study

While it would not be prudent to generalise the findings of the study more widely than the scope of the sample and its geographic location, some implications of the findings can be outlined, both implications for educational practice in general as well as implications for my personal practice. The thesis concludes with a consideration of some wider implications of the study for our understanding of the student as consumer ethos.

a) Implications for Educational Practice

The study found that participants did not view themselves as student consumers *per se* even though they exhibited consumer behaviours in some respects. This suggests that student consumerism is not a simple phenomenon and that much of the discourse in the literature may be less than helpful because it has assumed the phenomenon to be more one-dimensional and homogeneous.

The metaphor of the student-as consumer appears to be less applicable than many commentators have argued (e.g. McMillan & Cheney 1996, Delucchi & Smith 1997b, Schwartzman 1999, and Baldwin & James 2000) because it is insufficient to capture the nuances of how much students do and don't view their education as a commodity being purchased. The relationship between students and postsecondary institutions emerging from this study is more complex than the simple consumer expectations and transactions more prevalent in other marketplaces. The key aspect of this is the extent to which students see themselves as partners in the educational enterprise, active learners who help co-create their education rather than purchase it outright, confirming what others have argued, for example, Kotze & du Plessis (2003), George (2007), McCulloch (2009) and Davies (2012). The participants acknowledged the extent to which education was a transformational process and not simply a transactional one (Murphy & Brown 2012, Williams, J. 2013).

The most relevant commercial parallel, therefore, is not that students buy an education in a similar way to their buying a meal or a mobile phone, but that students buy an education in a similar way to their buying a membership to a gymnasium or a library, for example. They purchase access to an environment which has the potential to change them, but where the transformation can only occur through the effort of the consumer.

However, even this parallel is insufficient, as the study found that a key feature of the student experience was the prevalent unwillingness to complain. The providers of postsecondary education also act as judges who evaluate the

student's performance (Farias *et al.* 2010). Customers using a gymnasium are not denied continued membership if they fail to attend regularly or use the equipment inadequately. Patrons returning library books are not evaluated on how much they learned from reading a book before being permitted to borrow another book. In this respect, educational institutions are unique, and students are well aware of the power of the evaluators and how it constrains students' willingness to complain. Discourse on the marketisation of postsecondary education needs to acknowledge how different this marketplace is to other commercial markets.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest the role of students in promoting marketisation may be much less pronounced than the literature generally espouses. Indeed, the sources of marketisation observed in this study lay more in the behaviour of postsecondary institutions themselves than in the behaviour of their students. Participants often indicated that they were very aware of the abundant advertising that institutions used to attract prospective students and the marketing impact of institutional logos, tag lines and social media. Participants suggested that institutions focused on distinguishing themselves in the marketplace by focusing on the competitive advantage of attending one institution over another and on the non-learning outcomes of the education they were offering. Therefore, discussion of the marketisation of higher education may need to lower the attribution being paid to the student as a causal agent, and raise the extent to which institutions on the supply side are more active causes of increased marketisation.

The emphasis that the participants placed on being co-creators of their own learning rather than being merely consumers is welcome news for those educators who have stressed the transformational value of postsecondary studies (e.g. Jamieson & Naidoo 2004, Murphy & Brown 2012 and Williams J. 2013). The participants in this study acknowledged the extent to which they needed to apply effort to reach their educational goals and to be engaged in their own learning. This implies that educators should not seek to reduce the curriculum or the learning materials into easy-to-access capsules but should facilitate active participation by students in designing and pursuing independent learning and self-directed studies which encourage and exercise this aspect of the learning environment.

Furthermore, the participants in this study stressed the extent to which they did use comparison shopping when selecting a course based on the evaluations available from the website *RateMyProfessors* and used this source for information about professors even when they had no choice between professors. While the methodology used by this website is unscientific and questionable, students are using it almost universally. For good reason, institutions will want to continue to encourage professors to use individual pedagogical approaches towards the delivery of the curriculum. However, institutions can ameliorate unproductive variation in professor performance by standardizing such aspects as course evaluation and other instructional policies, where variation among professors is often perceived by students as being perniciously inconsistent.

Finally, the findings of the study also have implications for the postsecondary system in BC. Although the study found some notable variation in responses among participants enrolled in different programmes, the study found very little variation among different types of institution. The most likely explanation for this is that the array of institutions has grown increasingly homogenous in BC. This implies that provincial government policy towards increased differentiation among postsecondary type is needed or the current nomenclature of college, universities and institutes should be amalgamated to reflect more their commonality. In addition, the lack of differentiation among postsecondary institutions in the province is likely to increase rather than mollify the influence of marketisation, because a greater quantity of institutional effort and marketing resources are likely to be expended trying to create a separate identity for each institution in the marketplace.

b) Implications for personal practice

There are two aspects to these implications: the implications in my previously employed role, and those in my current retired status. I will discuss these separately below.

When I started this research study, I was employed as the Registrar and Director of Student Services for Douglas College in BC. In that capacity, I was responsible for areas such as recruitment, admissions, advising, counselling, financial aid, and services to specific populations such as aboriginal students and

students with disabilities. I chaired the educational appeals committee and handled numerous types of student complaints. I had previously served as an academic Dean after having taught as a lecturer for ten years. Throughout my career, I had been keenly interested in student success and ways in which this could be fostered, both in the classroom and outside. I had also become interested in an institution's responsibility to provide a quality education in a fair and equitable manner, recognizing prior learning and ensuring that policies were applied consistently, especially regarding admission, progression and graduation.

Part of the reason that I worked in academia was my comfort with the value-added outcome that a postsecondary education provided. I was "selling" something that had intrinsic value -- as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (Holmes 1858/1960) said: "Every now and then a man's mind is stretched by a new idea or sensation, and never shrinks back to its former dimensions" (p. 256). This value is enshrined in the fact that an education is a personal asset that cannot be lost -- unlike other assets such as a job or a house.

An education also provides extrinsic value. It affords students the opportunity to better their life situation, their career prospects, and their earning power. Repeatedly, studies have shown that the lifetime earnings of those with higher education credentials are superior to those without such an education.

The results of this research study have both confirmed and questioned my professional beliefs in ways that I was not expecting. They have confirmed that education is seen by the participants to have a transformational value -- it is not merely a means to an end, a contract of exchange or a purchase of a service. It is

much more than that as a *venue* of learning. And, as such, students perceive they have significant contributions to make as co-creators of learning. This re-affirms many of my own ethical and epistemological beliefs about the value and purpose of education. In addition, it also re-affirms many of the educational values and criteria that I operationalised when making decisions as an administrator -- such as, Does this decision foster student learning? Has the student made an adequate case that adverse factors are relevant? And is this decision fair to other students?

However, I was not expecting to find that students were antagonised by the pervasive marketing campaigns that postsecondary institutions in BC have launched, as the landscape has become a more competitive and commercial marketplace. I expected that students -- as consumers -- would welcome the stimulation of this increased media exposure. Of course, there are two ways of looking at this, either students *really do not* want to be bombarded with competing advertising among institutions -- because students do not rely on advertisements to make their decisions -- or, as the advertising industry would espouse, that people *claim to hate* advertising but are affected by it nonetheless. Either way, the implication from this research study is that administrators, such as I was, need to be very mindful of how much they spend on marketing and what the messages are that they actually communicate.

Now that I am retired from my career as a postsecondary employee, I have embarked upon a supplementary role as an educational consultant. In this capacity, I have completed contracts for BCCAT as an external consultant reviewing admission practices in BC, especially in light of proposed changes to

the secondary school graduation requirements in the province of BC, and I have provided services to Yorkville University (based in the province of New Brunswick) that has acquired permission to operate as a university in BC and sought my assistance in how to establish admission procedures and credit transfer arrangements in BC. In this new capacity, I can see various implications of my research study to my ongoing consulting practice.

First, I am more keenly aware now of how the postsecondary educational system in BC, and perhaps elsewhere, needs to articulate better to students what the criteria they should use for making the selection to enter one institution over another. The plethora of choice in the marketplace currently means that students need to be empowered to make informed and appropriate decisions. This is something that I intend to raise in my consulting work with BCCAT and see what further leadership role it can play.

Second, I think institutions need to take a more proactive role in establishing and publishing transparent ratings systems for academic staff rather than leaving students to make judgments and course selections based only on the unreliable and unscientific data available through the website *RateMy Professors*. Several institutions, such as Stanford University have developed in-house rating systems that are published for students to use. I intend to pursue this possibility as a consultant based on the finding in my study that students were almost universally relying on information available from this website.

Third, the use of student charters or other declarations of students' rights has been noticeably absent from postsecondary institutions in Canada generally

and BC as well, in comparison to their widespread existence in the UK and the USA. Many of the comments made by students in my research study suggest that students can be very uneasy about complaining or raising concerns for fear of reprisal, especially in career programmes of study, such as nursing. I think there needs to be more attention paid to developing and implementing institutional policies that provide more structure and support to students, so that they can contemplate and initiate expressions of complaint without fear. To this end, there is a role that student unions can play in moving this agenda forward, perhaps by more of them establishing local ombudspersons offices to assist students who wish to make complaints. In addition, the role of the current Office of the Ombudsperson in BC could be extended to include the functions of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator that was created in the UK.

c) Implications for the student-as-consumer ethos

The results of the study may have wider implications for understanding the student-as-consumer ethos in general.

First, as noted before in Chapter Two, although the history of student-as-consumer is as old as the institutions themselves, different notions of student power were also existent from the start. The oldest universities in Southern Europe, for example, copied the student-centric model of the University of Bologna where students largely ran the university. In contrast, other founding universities adopted the administrative-centric model of the University of Paris

where administrators, clergy and local agencies consolidated themselves into groups who hired professors and organized the university.

The participants in my study showed themselves generally to inhabit a position that was an amalgamation of these different power extremes. Participants neither felt they should be in full control of their education, nor did they feel it was inappropriate for them to have wants or be able to exercise choices.

However, where the power imbalance was most telling was in the reluctance of the students to make complaints against their professors. The students were well aware of the power differential that disenfranchised their ability to complain successfully. They also knew the concomitant potential that such complaints had for results of frustration, disappointment and reprisal. This is not something that is often considered by those describing the student-as-consumer ethos.

Generally, the consensus of discourse on this ethos is that student consumerism is robbing higher education institutions of their positional power by them having to pander to students as customers. In fact, such institutions retain considerable powers over the grades and graduation of students to the extent that a fully-realized consumer power base for students is structurally unlikely in today's post-secondary institutions. Our notion of the ethos of student consumerism would do well to recognize more prominently this facet of power-imbalance.

Second, as mentioned also before in Chapter Two, much of the debate about student consumerism has pitched a battle of values between students and their teachers. In this arena, students are presented as both more demanding and entitled as well as less engaged and more vocationally-minded. In contrast, the teaching profession is presented as valiantly trying to stem the tide of academic decline by proffering the inherent value of education for its own sake. The fight is essentially between a new instrumentalist view of the value of higher education and a traditional intrinsic view of its value (Peters, 1966).

However, as the views presented by the participants in this study have shown, this representation may be largely a canard. While a variety of consumerist traits are present in the data of my study – such as participants shopping for courses on RateMyProfessors.com – the participants were generally well aware of the need for them to do the learning and not to expect to be spoon-fed by their professors.

Indeed, the participants clearly saw the role that they were required to play in the teaching-learning exchange and did not shirk from it. They recognized they were co-producers of their educational end products, not simply consumers of what professors provided. While the participants may enjoy being entertained in class, they saw this as mere frivolity if they were not learning anything. Most were seeking education not edutainment.

Finally, much of the ethos of student consumerism in the literature has claimed this consumerism emanates from the students themselves. They are seen to be arriving at post-secondary institutions with consumerist mind-sets that they seek to impose on such institutions. The students are perceived as the villains.

Interestingly, the results of the data generated in this study suggest this view misses the mark by perhaps a wide margin. Today's students may be more focused on the instrumental value of their credentials to gain a better standing in life and career prospects than perhaps students of yesteryear. This is hardly surprising given the increased financial burden to them (or their parents/sponsors) caused by increased tuition fees, as governments unload more of the delivery costs of higher education onto students themselves. Students have had to become more consumer-conscious because government and society in general have raised the stakes.

In contrast, as mentioned before in Chapter Four, several participants reported that they felt the post-secondary institutions themselves treated them as consumers in their marketing campaigns in ways that the participants did not feel was accurate or appropriate.

The conclusion to be drawn from this study is not just that the participants in some ways viewed themselves as consumers of higher education but in many respects did not. Instead, the underlying conclusion is that the participants were

seeking ways in which they could become successful students, rather than seeking ways to be satisfied consumers of their higher education experiences.

Essentially, they were concerned with finding ways to be *learners*, not finding ways to reinforce themselves as *consumers*. This suggests that perhaps much of the debate of the appropriateness of the metaphor of student consumerism may be misplaced or even inversed. The results of this study suggest that the participants were less *students-as-consumers* and more *consumers-as-students*.

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APPENDIX 1: GENERIC PARTICIPANTS' CONSENT FORM

Your voluntary participation is being requested to take part in a research project called *The Nature of Student Consumerism*.

The general purpose of this study is to conduct an empirical investigation of students' attitudes towards the phenomenon of student consumerism using interviews and focus groups to generate qualitative data that can provide a picture of how, why and to what extent students perceive themselves to be consumers of higher education.

If you agree to participate in this research project, you will be asked to participate in either a focus group with 4 other students or an in-person interview with the researcher. You will be asked questions about being a student at [institution] and how you experience being a student.

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and you will not be penalized or adversely affected in any way should you decline to participate, withdraw from the study at any time (even after giving initial consent), refuse to answer particular questions, or refuse to participate in a portion of the study.

Your anonymity will be maintained by the researcher not releasing your name to anyone else, by the researcher not reporting information about you or what you have said that could identify you, and by the researcher giving you a copy of the draft report so you can be sure that no identifying information is being reported.

Confidentiality with respect to the information you provide will be secured by the researcher having the audiotape of the focus group or interview transcribed into text that does not identify you as a participant, by the researcher maintaining those transcripts in a locked cabinet in his office, and by the researcher destroying all transcripts by [date].

The benefits of being a participant in this study include being able to express your opinion on the topic so as to help [institution name] understand its students better and thus to help the institution design programs and services that better meet students' needs. Participants will also receive a \$30 coupon which can be redeemed on campus for food, photocopying or other services.

There are no foreseeable risks to participants in this study.

The time commitment of participating in this study is one hour for the focus group or interview plus the time to read the final report.

The data collected will be used as part of the completion of a doctoral dissertation by the researcher.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the project, the methods used in the study or your treatment as a participant, please contact the name + contact information].

I, _____, understood the information stated above. I have been given an opportunity to have all of my questions answered fully. I agree to participate in this study and indicate my consent by signing below.

Signature of Participant:

Date:

APPENDIX 2: ETHICS APPROVAL FROM THE OPEN UNIVERSITY



The Open University

From Dr Duncan Banks
Chair, The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee
Email duncan.banks@open.ac.uk^[1]
Extension 59198

To Edwin (Ted) James, FELS

Subject "The nature of student consumerism"
Ref HREC/2013/1395/James/1
Red form
Submitted 28 February 2013
Date 04 March 2013

Memorandum

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, is **has been given a favourable opinion** by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Please make sure that any question(s) relating to your application and approval are sent to Research-REC-Review@open.ac.uk quoting the HREC reference number above. We will endeavour to respond as quickly as possible so that your research is not delayed in any way.

At the conclusion of your project, by the date that you stated in your application, the Committee would like to receive a summary report on the progress of this project, any ethical issues that have arisen and how they have been dealt with.

Regards,

Dr Duncan Banks
Chair OU HREC

^[1] please note the change in email address

APPENDIX 3: INITIAL CODING OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Extract from Interview #34
March 18, 2015

Public College participant
Undergraduate arts student

Interview Extract	Initial Codes
<p>Interviewer: Okay, thank you. Well, I'm going to move on. How much effort are you devoting to your studies? How much energy and effort goes into it, would you say?</p> <p>Participant: I would say my—I want to say like intellectual or mental work is more than my physical work, because I've been — I do — this semester, specifically, I've been doing a lot of reading and a lot of like analytical interpretation kind of the work with novels, specifically, so I don't see myself doing as much like writing ...</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay.</p> <p>Participant: work that I could be doing, but I've been doing more, like I said, intellectual thinking and critical thinking with some classmates about the issues and topics that are covered in class.</p> <p>Interviewer: Do you find there are any difficulties that get in the way or barriers that get in the way to you being able to put the amount of effort that you want to into your studies?</p> <p>Participant: Only my personal procrastination of myself; you know, my internal dialogue saying “just put it off until tomorrow” kind of stuff. Or there's a—sometimes when a friend of mine wants to hang out and I've been very busy and preoccupied with work and school and in my mind I'm saying “I should be doing school” or “I want to be doing school,” and at the same time my friends want to hang out, and then they're saying, like, “oh, you don't want to hang out, you don't like me,” and then,</p>	<p>Mental vs physical work</p> <p>Discussing with class mates</p> <p>Procrastination barrier</p> <p>Tension with friends “Juggling act”</p>

<p>reading before the reading is actually due for the class to get this paper done. So, I see how my teacher sets up these assignments to have us read ahead already, how he intentionally set that up to have us be more reading and not so laid back about what we do, you know, laid back about our readings and not be so casual about it.</p>	<p>Structure is intentional</p> <p>Structure vs “casual” approach to studying</p>
<p>Interviewer: So, when did you realize that the professor wanted more out of you, because of this structure?</p>	
<p>Participant: Yes, out of this structure, and, as well, the pace of how the class is going, how it moves very fast. Some classes I've taken, you know, cover two or three chapters in the one class and it's very fast paced, and it can be difficult if you're not on top of it and you don't do your readings and stay on top of it, and I find other times where professors aren't as intentional and—I don't know—I don't want to blame their teaching methods or the teacher specifically, but I get the feeling sometimes where I could be more casual and laid back about my readings, where it's not as necessary or, you know, it's not required in the class discussions as much as other classes.</p>	<p>Structure creates fast pace</p> <p>Professor sets structure</p>
<p>Interviewer: So it varies from one ...</p>	
<p>Participant: Yes.</p>	
<p>Interviewer: to another. Okay. We've talked about how much effort you put in. What about your involvement, the extent to which you feel connected and engaged in your studies, your level of—what you're getting out of it? You're putting in this effort. How much are you getting out of it?</p>	
<p>Participant: I see I'm definitely getting a lot of involvement and getting a lot back for myself.</p>	<p>Results of effort</p>
<p>Interviewer: How so?</p>	
<p>Participant: Well, specifically, like my history class, I have more understanding of how like our society—society around me works, how I personally am an individual but also participant in society, and sometimes I feel, because of the—because of what we discuss in class in history or English, sometimes I can look at a situation or a scenario and kind of stand on the peripheral or the boundaries, right, and look inside, and, you know, be</p>	<p>Education expands perspective</p> <p>Product of new perspective</p>

<p>able to characterize and see how some people fall into like a particular, I guess, type ...</p> <p>Interviewer: Right.</p> <p>Participant: ... based on what we study, right, and just how ...</p> <p>Interviewer: So, you see some of the ideas that you talk about in class being reflected in the real life ...</p> <p>Participant: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: ... situations that you encounter.</p> <p>Participant: Mm-hmm. Yes, and ...</p> <p>Interviewer: So, that helps you feel involved. You feel as though what you're learning is helping you to see things in different ways.</p> <p>Participant: Yes, I definitely see myself being involved in that way, and also there's sometimes when, like I said, a situation or a scenario will be in front of me and I'll notice it and think like, "oh, that's really cool", and then I want to be a part of that, and I'll want to engage with it like on a more, I guess, personal level, rather than just looking at it from the outside.</p> <p>Interviewer: Right.</p> <p>Participant: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: Interesting. Let's talk about your achievements.</p> <p>Participant: Sure.</p> <p>Interviewer: How successful do you think you're being in your courses, how satisfied are you with your grades?</p> <p>Participant: I think I've been successful in my classes, but I'm not always happy with my grades. Just sometimes, when I'll be really comfortable and have a good understanding, or I think I have a good understanding of an idea or a topic that's discussed in class, and sometimes I find my understanding of that idea isn't always portrayed in the sense that I wanted it</p>	<p>Education expands perspective</p> <p>Product of new perspective</p> <p>Discontent with grades</p> <p>Expected grades not realised</p>
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<p>to be portrayed, or my professor doesn't understand what I'm really trying to get at in those papers, and that's where I get disappointed in my marks.</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay.</p> <p>Participant: Is that a bit of like my professor doesn't understand what I'm getting—or what I'm trying to discuss, and at the same time I guess I didn't understand what he or she was wanting out of that assignment at the same time.</p> <p>Interviewer: Right. So, there's a bit of a mismatch ...</p> <p>Participant: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: ... and that can cause you to get a lower grade than you otherwise thought you deserved.</p> <p>Participant: Yes, exactly.</p> <p>Interviewer: and how important are good grades to you?</p> <p>Participant: It's hard to say. I mean, I definitely like good grades, but I'm not always coming to a class—or when I sign up for a class, I'm not thinking like, “oh, this is going to be an easy A,” right, or “oh, I'd get my GPA up with this.” I think, like I said, good grades are nice, but at the same time I'm not always concerned with getting a good grade. I'm more concerned in the grasping the knowledge and the understanding that my professors want to convey, and I'm—there's been some classes where I feel very successful and accomplished in my understanding and what I've gotten out of that class despite getting like a B or a C+, right?</p> <p>Interviewer: Right, right. So, there's other things that you find valuable ...</p> <p>Participant: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: ... beyond just the ...</p> <p>Participant: The letter grade, yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: ... the letter grade itself. How do you expect to earn a good grade? What do you see as being</p>	<p>Mismatch between professor and student expectations</p> <p>Desire for more than simply good grades</p> <p>Seeking “knowledge and understanding”</p> <p>Desire for more than simply good grades</p>
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<p>the activities that you would expect to do in order to be able to earn a high grade?</p> <p>Participant: Being intentional in my studies, in my readings that my professor assigns, participating in class and sharing my ideas with classmates, but also taking into account what other classmates have to say, like what their ideas may ...</p> <p>Interviewer: Right.</p> <p>Participant: ... you know, contribute to what I'm also saying as well, yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: Yes.</p> <p>Participant: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: Do you think that there ought to be some way in which you can be certain what kind of grades you'd get? Like, if there was a way of being able to contract for a particular grade, and say, you know, like "if you do this you'll get this grade," would that make life easier?</p> <p>Participant: I'm not too sure, I think it's hard to say. I think if it was that easy—I think, yes, if it was that easy and, you know, laid out for students and for myself, I don't think that people would be as motivated or intentional behind their studies and why they're at [College name] or any institution, because when it gets to that point, saying like, you know, "just do this and you'll get the grade," I think people would start falling into doing like the bare minimum and just not taking a real interest or motivation, yes, not really striving for their own education as something that, you know, they want to use to better themselves.</p> <p>Interviewer: Right.</p> <p>Participant: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay, thank you. Let's talk a little bit about the faculty themselves. What's your opinion of your professors in general?</p> <p>Participant: Most of them, I like.</p>	<p>Being intentional</p> <p>Connecting with classmates</p> <p>Grade contracting limitations – intentionality</p> <p>Grade contracting limitations – motivation</p> <p>Grade contracting limitations – outcomes</p>
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<p>Interviewer: Yes.</p> <p>Participant: Most of them are really good and I find proficient in, you know, what our classes—or what my classes have been about. I prefer professors, I guess, where they allow I guess open discussion about ideas or opinions, and where professors aren't stuck in I guess narrow-mindedness or like thinking one way.</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay.</p> <p>Participant: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: So, where they're open to involving the students more in their discussion of the topic rather than ...</p> <p>Participant: Being directive or ...</p> <p>Interviewer: ... just lecturing at people.</p> <p>Participant: Yes, exactly.</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay. What contact have you had with your professors outside of the classroom? Have you gone to their office hours or had conversations with them at a break, or had e-mail contact with them?</p> <p>Participant: Yes, I've had pretty well all of that. I've gone to professors' offices. Actually, I've been to—two of my professors currently right now, I saw them in their office, and ...</p> <p>Interviewer: What's been motivating you to go and do that?</p> <p>Participant: Well, based on the interest in my education, asking them specifically about essay papers, asking them what specifically they were looking for, where I could've improved on my paper or what they enjoyed or, you know, what they liked about my paper that I should continue, and, as well, for really upcoming papers—have two papers coming up due in two or three weeks. Recently, I've gone and talked to my professors about, I guess, defining their question and like really asking them like what should my focus of my paper be, what should I worry about or what should I not worry about as much when it comes to this topic. So, asking for more</p>	<p>“proficient” professors</p> <p>Open-minded professors</p> <p>Approaching professors for help</p> <p>Seeking feedback for improvement</p> <p>Seeking direction</p>
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direction and more insight I guess overall, yes.	
Interviewer: Have you been satisfied with how that contact has gone in those discussions?	
Participant: Yes, yes, satisfied.	
Interviewer: Is there anything that you think you prefer your professors to do more of in the classroom or outside the classroom, anything that you think they could do more of to help you in general?	
Participant: I can't think of anything off the top of my head.	
Interviewer: Okay. Is there anything you'd prefer them to do less of?	
Participant: I'm not too sure. I guess it's day to day. Some instances where my professors will, you know, kind of go off topic or talk about something that I don't understand or I don't have an interest in, so it doesn't—so I don't feel connected to what they're talking about.	Professors talking “off-topic”
Interviewer: Right.	Lack of connection
Participant: So, if I'm not connected to what they're talking about, sometimes it occurs to me like they're just rambling and talking about something random, where most likely it probably does have something to do with our class, but for some reason I've been disconnected and I'm not focused on what they're—connection they're trying to make.	Lack of connection by student
Interviewer: Okay. So if you go to a class and you come away from it and say, “wow, that was really, really good, really interesting and I got a lot out of it,” can you remember classes that have been like that?	
Participant: Yes.	
Interviewer: And what do you think was happening that made you satisfied?	“taking an interest”
Participant: Well, I definitely see in those cases, where I was taking an interest in the topic, I was, you know, willing to learn more or be open to what my professor or other students had to say, and at the same time my	Professor “open” to

<p>professor was open and wanting to hear from the students about what we thought about the topic, you know, in-class discussion or in-class debate about whatever, and, yes, just openness in the class.</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay. So, are your professors particularly important to your sense of satisfaction?</p> <p>Participant: Yes, I'd say so. They definitely direct and guide where the class is going and also provide a lot of useful insight and definitely knowledge that sometimes I wouldn't otherwise think about or, you know, consider.</p> <p>Interviewer: Right.</p> <p>Participant: Yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: And have you chosen to have the same professor again because of a good experience that you've had?</p> <p>Participant: I have before, yes.</p> <p>Interviewer: And the opposite, too, you've stayed away from somebody who you didn't think you were so ...?</p> <p>Participant: Yes, once.</p> <p>Interviewer: ... satisfied with?</p> <p>Participant: Yes. I have used the ratemyprofessor.com website? (Audio interference). I think that (inaudible) I only ever probably looked it up once, and ...</p> <p>Interviewer: You didn't have (inaudible)?</p> <p>Participant: Not that it wasn't satisfying, I just didn't get why it was useful and ...</p> <p>Interviewer: And it didn't help you make a choice.</p> <p>Participant: Yes, it didn't help me make a choice one way or the other, because I find like in those instances, it's subjective, about how people interpret or how people relate to other people, especially professors (inaudible) students (inaudible) professors and relate to them. So a lot of times when I would read Rate My Professor, I kind of found some comments funny or just</p>	<p>student input</p> <p>Professor "providing insight"</p> <p>External ratings</p> <p>External rating not satisfying</p> <p>External rating subjective</p> <p>External rating not satisfying</p>
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kind of unnecessary or stupid.	
Interviewer: What about other classmates, do you (inaudible) professors and ...	
Participant: Yes. Sometimes we'll—a friend of mine will share about a professor that we've had in common, and, yes, say why we liked them and why we didn't like them, maybe...	Comparing professors
Interviewer: Right.	
Participant: Yes.	
Interviewer: Okay. So you make a choice to choose somebody or not to choose somebody?	
Participant: More often than to choose somebody than not to choose somebody, yes.	External rating – choice preference

APPENDIX 4: GROUPING CODES TO IDENTIFY CONCEPTS

Data	Code	Concept
I wanted to get some courses... any courses that would help me... not easy.	Difficulty getting courses	Choosing courses
You realise that what course you take really matters... it needs to be planned out...	Planning for outcomes	
I started out just taking things... what I liked...	Courses I liked	
Wow I never realised how important my course choices were	Courses I liked	
You know, there's lots to consider when deciding on electives because... I have change[d] my goals several times... just can't decide.	Changing courses	
My parents had big views on what I should take ... Like they knew anything about education... but they gave me good advice to make sure there was positive outcome... like a good job at the end.	Planning for outcomes	
I spoke to academic advisor who showed me the way	Use of advisor	
I always select courses that I like	Courses I liked	
Well I don't want to repeat courses I have already taken... I mean that is stupid... why would I want to do that	Not repeat courses	
We have no choice...	No choice over which professor they have	
My counsellor [advisor] said I need macro-economics to transfer	Courses needed for transfer	
I chose what I wanted to do...	Courses I liked	
It is way more important for me to get a degree quickly and not have to repeat courses	Not repeat courses	
I think the wide selection of courses makes it difficult for me to decide on what to take next	Wide selection of courses	
I like having a choice in what courses I can take	Planning for outcomes	
Pathways are not clear.... How do I choose courses?	Planning for outcomes	
I've changed my route several times... like it's been like I've changed my plans too many times to remember [laughs].	Changing plans	

APPENDIX 5: REVIEWING CONCEPTS TO IDENTIFY CLUSTERS

